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As you read this, the 2026 World Cup will be getting underway, and this issue is all about FIFA's showpiece event. As well as picking out 50 players we're excited to see in North America this summer, and asking some of our experts for their predictions for the tournament, we've also taken a look back at some World Cup history.

We've got plenty more World Cup content, and not just in these pages. If you missed our World Cup guide, or our History of the World Cup special, it's still possible to get hold of a copy at shop.kelsey.co.uk/WSCBK. Next month we'll be reviewing the 2025-26 European domestic season.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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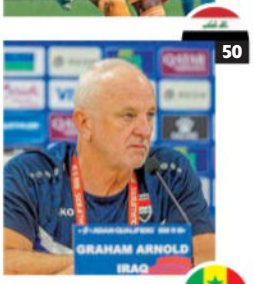

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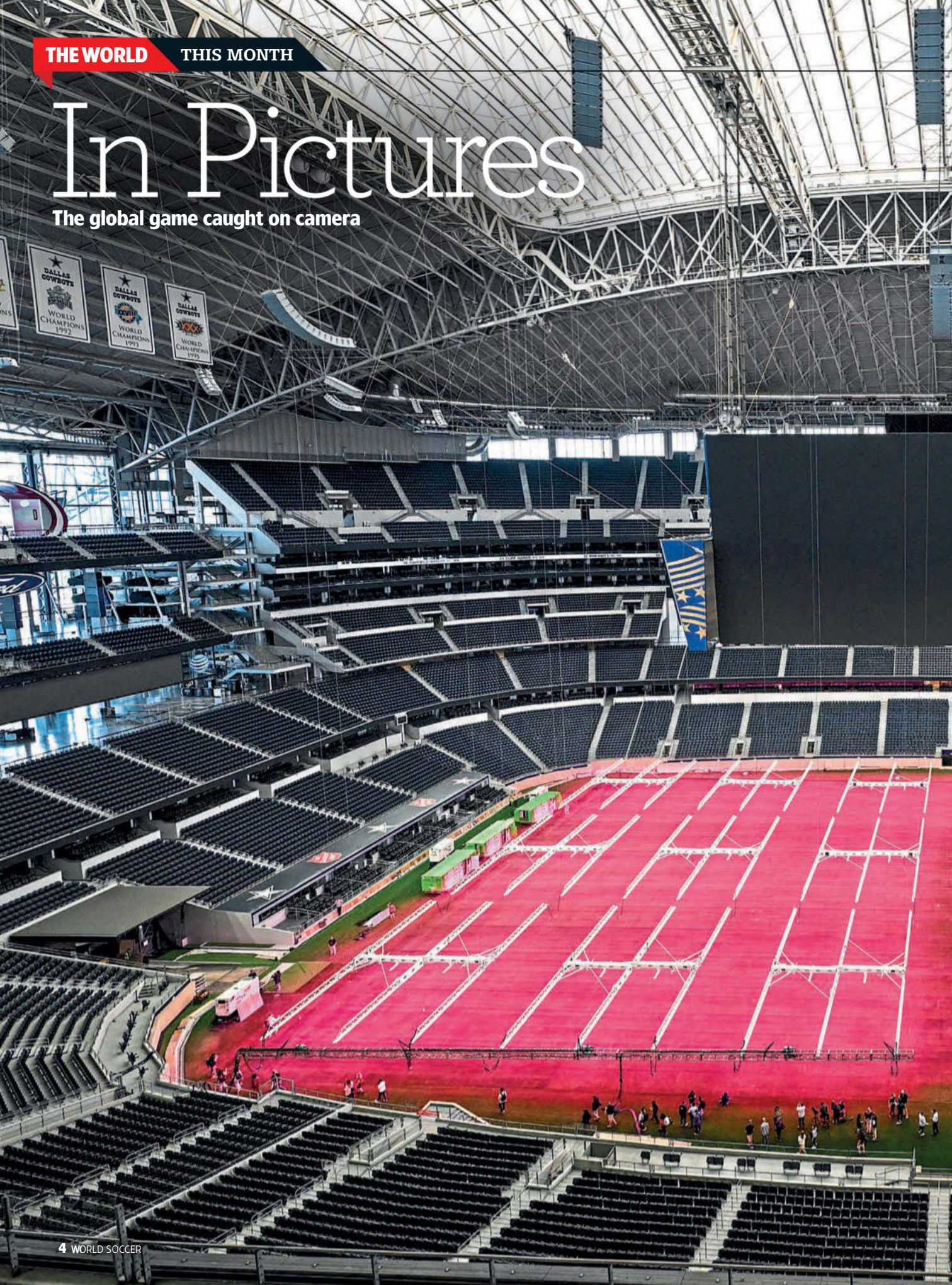

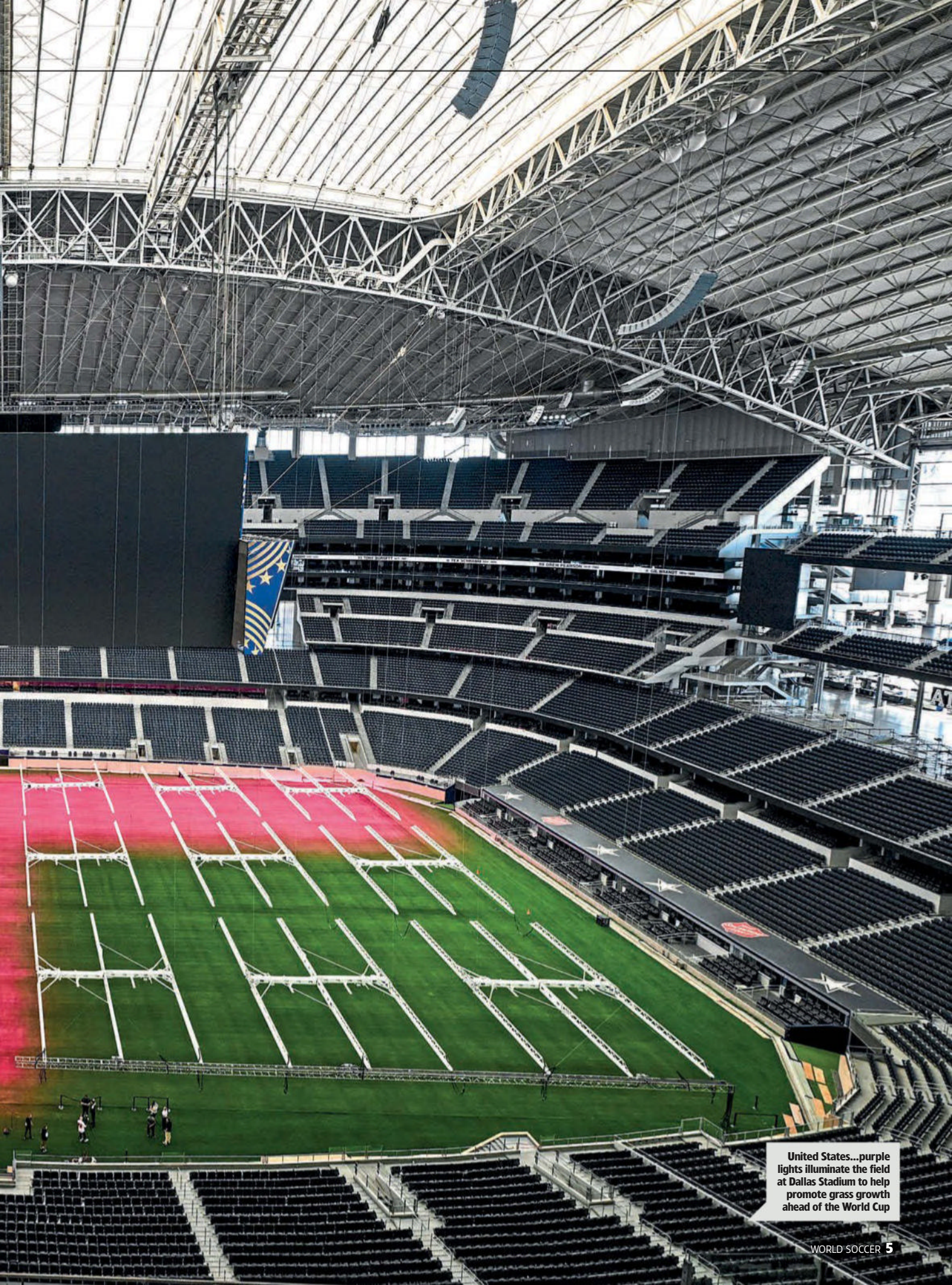

United States...purple lights illuminate the field at Dallas Stadium to help promote grass growth ahead of the World Cup

Panama...a giant replica World Cup trophy is placed at the Cinta Costera in Panama City

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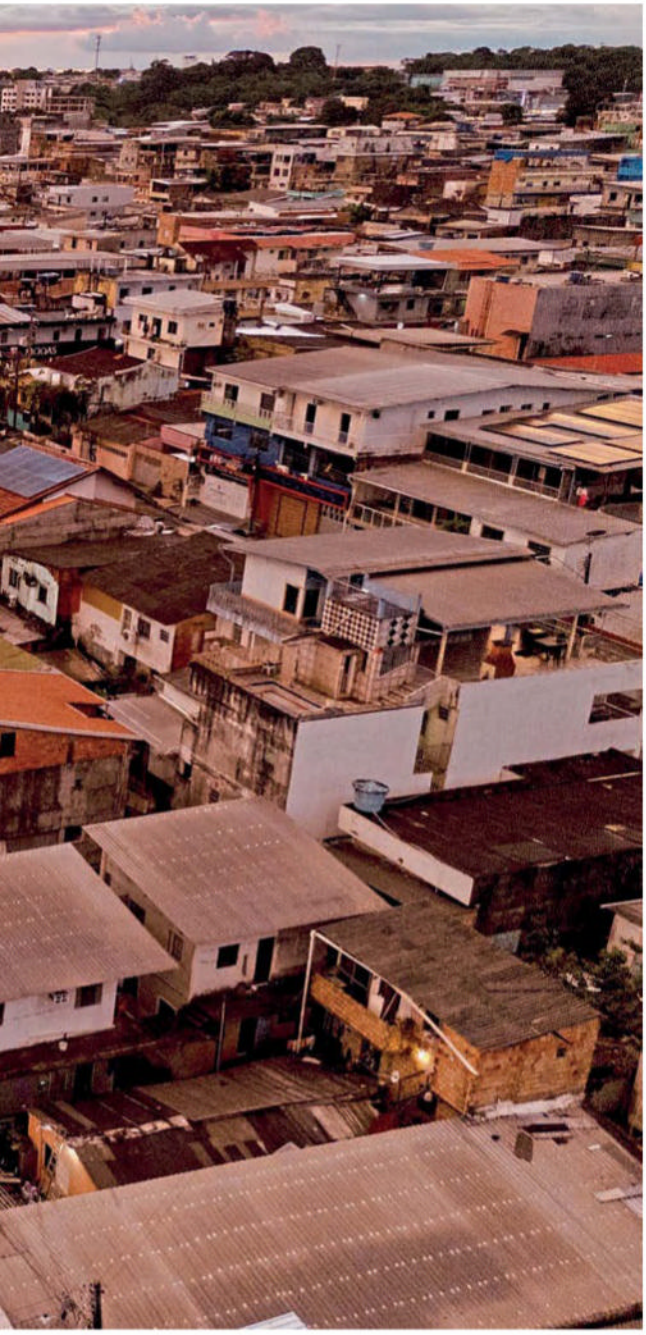
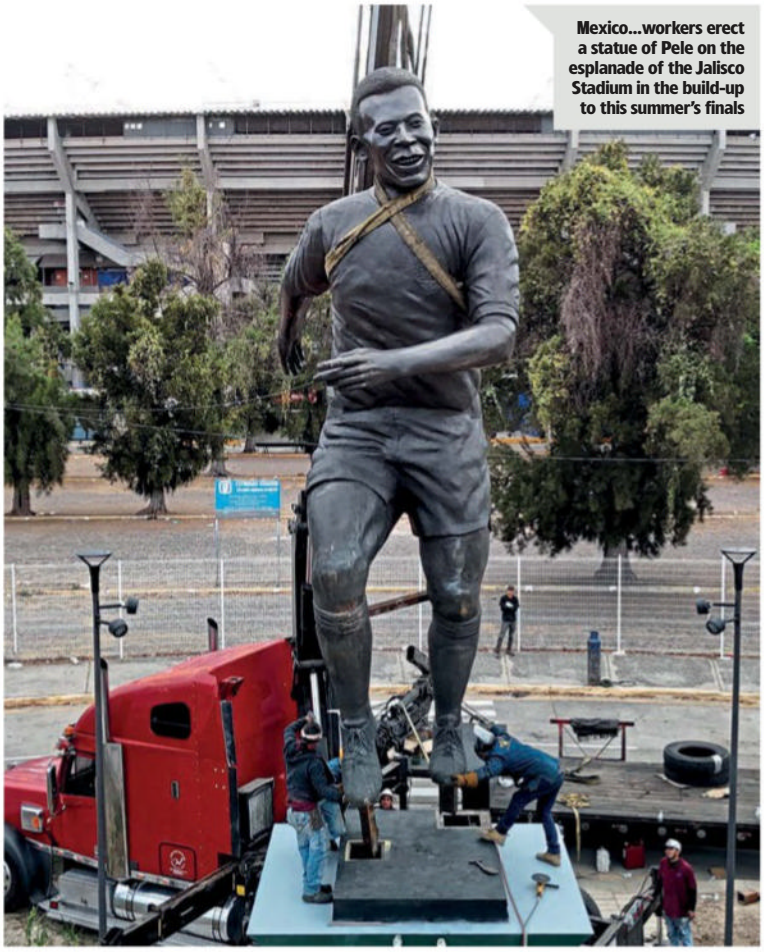


Iran...members of Iran's national team attend a farewell ceremony in Tehran ahead of their departure for North America 2026



Mexico...workers erect a statue of Pele on the esplanade of the Jalisco Stadium in the build-up to this summer's finals

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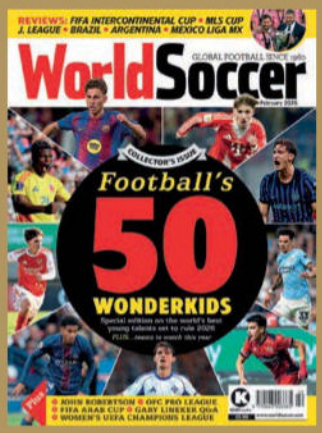
Colombia...smoke engulfs the stadium during Junior's Copa Libertadores group-stage clash with Cerro Porteno of Paraguay *(more on page 80)*

England...Arsenal supporters congregate outside the Emirates to celebrate their first Premier League title win in 22 years

Italy...Inter fans and players celebrate clinching the Serie A title with an open-top bus parade in Milan *(read our full European season review in July's issue)*



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Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

No room for Reds in Tuchel's England

Left out...Liverpool's Curtis Jones hasn't played for England since last summer's defeat to Senegal

Liverpool's recruitment and player development came under intense scrutiny after England arrived for the World Cup without any representation from Anfield beyond the inclusion of the exciting teenager Rio Ngumoha in their Florida preparation camp. It's the first time since 1986 that there have been no Liverpool players with England at a World Cup. Before that, you have to go all the way back to 1954 to see a Three Lions squad with no Reds representative.

Nobody can really question what Liverpool have contributed to England – 75 of their number have represented the country, stretching back to Harry Bradshaw against Ireland in 1897.

Moving on to more illustrious Liverpool players, you could make an all-star England XI from the club's top 11 cap-winners alone: Ray Clemence; Phil Neal, Phil Thompson, Emlyn Hughes, Jamie Carragher (2001 treble vintage); Steven Gerrard, Peter Beardsley, John Barnes; Emile Heskey, Michael Owen and World Cup winner Roger Hunt – 570 caps between them while at Liverpool.

There's plenty in reserve, too: Trent Alexander-Arnold, Raheem Sterling, Steve McManaman, Danny Murphy, Jordan Henderson, Paul Ince, Kevin Keegan and Robbie Fowler.

Eleven Liverpool players have actually captained England, including Gerrard on 38 occasions and Keegan on 31.

Yet England manager Thomas Tuchel hardly looked at Anfield in selecting his 26. There wasn't even a mention of his omission of Joe Gomez and Curtis Jones when the squad was announced. Nor did there deserve to be: neither Gomez nor Jones were playing well enough (or frequently enough) to make the squad for this summer's party.

Jarell Quansah, the 23-year-old centre-back who did make Tuchel's 26, was sold by Liverpool at the start of the season for £30 million to Bayer Leverkusen. I spoke to Quansah – and his very engaging parents – at the UEFA Under-21 Championship in Slovakia last summer, and his ambition and talent were very evident. At times during a difficult season, Arne Slot could have done with Quansah, and Liverpool surely reflect with some regret on his departure. Liverpool's academy can still take some vicarious pride at the progress of a player who joined their club aged five.

If Liverpool had moved more swiftly last summer they would have landed Marc Guehi, now England's first-choice left-sided centre-back.

A cursory glance through the England age groups highlights that other elite Premier League clubs like Chelsea and Manchester City provide more talent. Liverpool's presence amongst the development teams is confined to: Ngumoha and Trey Nyoni in the Under-19s; defender Shadrach Ekiugbo and forwards Vincent Joseph and Joshua Abe in the Under-16s; and midfielder Luca Eden in the Under-15s. There were no Liverpool players in the Under-21s squad in March.

Liverpool fans have mixed feelings about the national team. Some see it as representative of an establishment they despise. They also take pride from the club's extensive contribution to the World Cup with ambassadors from other countries, including international captains like Virgil van Dijk and Dominik Szoboszlai.

Liverpool don't have a duty to provide players for the national team, but it makes sound commercial sense, developing your own, and also keeping to UEFA homegrown quotas. Speaking to people at Arsenal, they believe Mikel Arteta wants an English presence in the team, intensifying a bond. They have sent Bukayo Saka, Declan Rice, Eberechi Eze and Noni Madueke to the World Cup – with Myles Lewis-Skelly, Ethan Nwaneri – another heading for the Florida prep camp – and Max Dowman future stars waiting in the wings. Under Jurgen Klopp, Liverpool had Henderson and James Milner driving standards. They had Alexander-Arnold and Harvey Elliott.

It might prove simply cyclical. Maybe Ngumoha will lead the comeback. Having had nobody at Mexico '86, Liverpool sent Peter Beardsley, Steve McMahon and John Barnes to Italia '90.

Ince spilled blood and sweat in Rome in helping England qualify for France '98 where he started all four games, McManaman contributed against Colombia, and Owen lit up the world. Gerrard was given the No.4 shirt by Sven-Goran Eriksson for the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea but needed a groin operation. Danny Murphy, his club-mate on standby, took the No.4 but then broke a metatarsal in training and flew home, eventually replaced by West Ham United's Trevor Sinclair. Liverpool still had the significant presence of Owen and Heskey, who started all five games as England's attack, and shared three goals.

Liverpool had a fab four in 2006 in Germany – Gerrard, Carragher, Peter Crouch and Scott Carson. Gerrard and Carragher were joined by Glen Johnson in South Africa in 2010. With the former Liverpool manager Roy Hodgson in charge, England took six from Anfield to Brazil in 2014: Gerrard, Johnson, Henderson, Sterling, Daniel Sturridge and Rickie Lambert. Half of England's starting outfield in the opening group game against Italy up the Amazon were supplied by Liverpool (all but Lambert). Henderson and Alexander-Arnold went to both Russia 2018 and Qatar 2022.

Liverpool have played their part in the long-running England drama, and will doubtless do so again.

> Liverpool don't have a duty to provide players for the national team, but it makes sound commercial sense, developing your own

Brazil and the Bs

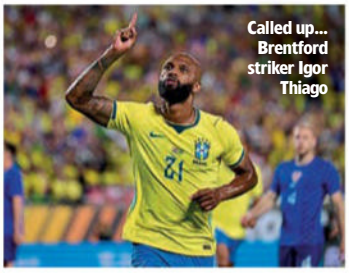
The strength in depth of the Premier League was highlighted not only by having finalists in all three of UEFA's club competitions. Brazil's formal World Cup squad announcement brought pride to some of the upwardly mobile Premier League clubs. I know Brentford fans left almost speechless with joy at hearing Carlo Ancelotti, the great Don Carlo and head coach of Brazil, regally announcing the name of "Igor Thiago – Brentford".

Bournemouth supporters were similarly delighted by Ancelotti studiously savouring every syllable of "Rayan – Bournemouth". It was not the greatest season in the Premier League in terms of quality but there was plenty to admire in the inspired recruitment and sales of clubs like Brentford and Bournemouth.

Brentford sold players for £130m, spent £68m and finished ninth. Igor Thiago arrived in 2024 for £30m from Club Brugge, and this season finished runner-up to Erling Haaland in the Premier League Golden Boot race (22 goals to 27). Brentford smartly extended Thiago's contract in February to 2031, which at the very least will ensure a £60m+ fee when wealthy suitors come calling. A good World Cup will increase his value further.

Bournemouth sold £257m of talent, spent £83m and finished in the Europa League positions. Rayan cost £24.7m in January from Vasco da Gama (the club of his father, the defender Valkmar). Five goals in five Premier League games later and, after winning his first cap, the 19-year-old is worth double that.

Brighton & Hove Albion are widely considered to have the most sophisticated recruitment department, drawing heavily on the data kings of Jamestown Analytics, but two of the other Premier League "Bs" are clearly not far behind. As Brazil prove.



Called up... Brentford striker Igor Thiago

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

The modern World Cup: louder, richer, bigger

The relentless march of FIFA's juggernaut shows no signs of slowing down

Louder, richer, bigger...the 2026 World Cup will be the biggest ever

Ivo Schricker would be astonished. Ivo who? Probably few people even at FIFA now know the name, beyond a dusty old list of pioneers from the inter-war years. But without Schricker, FIFA and the World Cup might not be the international social and sporting juggernaut now rolling irresistibly across North America.

In Schricker's day, in the 1930s, FIFA struggled to bring 16 teams to the World Cup finals, let alone 48 to break records in all directions. He was brought up in a very different world, albeit one in which power mattered. He would not recognise the modern tech-driven world, but he would recognise the underlying currents that brought world football to its current state in Canada, Mexico and the United States: louder, richer, bigger.

Schricker was born in 1877 in Strasbourg when Alsace fell within the German empire. A keen football pioneer, he became friends with an ambitious young referee named Peter "Peco" Bauwens and Walther Bensemann, the founder of *Kicker* magazine and renowned as "the man who brought football to Germany".

Schricker's linguistic capability – as well as German and French he also spoke English and Spanish – eased his way into a FIFA circle established around Jules Rimet and vice-president Rodolphe Seeldrayers. Schricker encouraged them in pursuit of a World Cup rather than a European Championship, recognising its potential to rescue FIFA from the financial hole it was in. Thus his pragmatism saw him defeat the Austrian Hugo Meisl to become general secretary. As FIFA's first senior employee, his role was decisive in 1932 in shifting offices from Paris to Zurich.

This was crucial to the history of FIFA and the World Cup. By the late 1930s, the Nazi-led German federation had its eye on FIFA's international outreach. In 1940 Bauwens, by now a member of the FIFA executive committee, proposed an extra delegate and a new voting system with the largest FA, i.e. Germany, having extra voting rights. Even, maybe, moving HQ to Berlin.

The Nazis promised travel passes to committee members, including Rimet, for a showdown meeting in Zurich. Then they cancelled them all at the last moment. But when Bauwens turned up in Zurich for a *coup d'état* he found that his old friend Schricker, along with Seeldrayers, had turned against him. Nothing could be changed, they told him, without a congress and a congress was impossible while Germany was waging war beyond the Swiss borders.

FIFA thus retained its Swiss-based independence to emerge politically

unscathed from the conflict and revive the World Cup in 1950. Schricker, by then 73, retired a year later, with FIFA's World Cup set on its remarkable ascendancy. By the 1960s, it was a football showpiece and, by the time Joao Havelange quit the presidency in 1998, it had become a political and financial powerhouse.

Gianni Infantino has been derided by the traditional media for an egotistical leadership style. One source of resentment is his refusal to hold old-fashioned press conferences, instead reaching over the media's head to millions of football fans worldwide via social media. Another has been his predilection for cosying up to heads of state, not least in orchestrating a grotesque peace prize for United States President Donald Trump.

But Infantino, for all his apparent power, is himself a prisoner within a gilded World Cup cage.

The World Cup now outstrips the Olympic Games in terms of financial power. That is the analysis of Michael Payne and, as the marketing mastermind of the modern Olympics, he should know. The more money the World Cup generates the more largesse is demanded by the grasping hands of the 211 national associations who lock the president in place.

Revenues from the 2026 finals will reach $12 billion, almost twice the record from Qatar 2022 to fuel a certain increase in FIFA's $2m annual handouts to its FAs. This is the reason the current World Cup features 48 teams. This is the reason that issues such as the Iran war, player welfare, environmental concerns and ICE oversight can all be brushed aside. Nothing should withstand the onwards march of the World Cup.

South America's governing body, CONMEBOL, wants to harness that momentum to expand the World Cup in 2030 to 64 teams. President Alejandro Dominguez believes the centenary deserves such gigantism. As he said: "This must not be a normal World Cup. We must be dreaming big because when everyone celebrates football together, the festival is truly global."

His ten member FAs all agree. Enthusiastically. After all, with six slots plus a play-off option already in the 2026 finals, maybe all ten could contest the 2030 finals without the tedious hassle of a qualifying tournament.

Uruguay staged the first finals in 1930 and, unrealistically, had long expected a central role in 2030.

Revenues from the 2026 finals will reach $12 billion, almost twice the record from Qatar 2022 – this is the reason the current World Cup features 48 teams

World Cup expansion eventually forced it to negotiate a co-hosting bid with Argentina. Chile showed interest in coming on board but not for long. Dominguez proposed the involvement of Paraguay too because, apart from being his own country, it is home to CONMEBOL headquarters in Luque, just east of the capital, Asuncion.

Considerations for voting support had already persuaded Europe's opposing bidders, Portugal and Spain, to rope in Morocco. So, with all these countries either side of the Atlantic, the argument for 64 teams soon gathered momentum. Infantino noted, after meeting the South American states' presidents: "We are working together to create something the world will not forget."

Initial reaction was guarded. UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin said: "It's a bad idea. I don't know where the idea came from. But it's strange that we in the FIFA Council knew nothing about this proposal." Victor Montagliani, president of CONCACAF, thought the subject should be avoided until after the 2026 finals. Asia's Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa said: "Maybe someone could come along and demand 132 teams. Where would we end up then? It would be chaos."

It would also bring a further diminution in quality. Infantino, however, has already pronounced: "Every idea is a good idea." This brings to mind the late Brian Glanville's put-down of Infantino's predecessor: "Sepp Blatter has 50 new ideas every day, 51 of them bad."

Naturally, FIFA's membership would be unlikely to stand in the way. More teams, more matches, more broadcasting deals, more sponsors, more money. Everyone's a winner.

Would Ivo Schricker believe it? As an insightful judge of character, good and bad, he most certainly would.

Influential figure...Ivo Schricker, FIFA's former general secretary from 1932 to 1951

BOOKS THIS MONTH

501 WORLD CUP MOMENTS
By Luciano Wernicke (Pitch Publishing, £12.99)

501 World Cup Moments: Stars, Teams, Goals and Curiosities from Football's Greatest Show on Earth is an amazing journey through the rich history of the most important tournament in football. This enthralling book is brimming with incredible matches, great goals, astounding anecdotes, trivia, quotes, records and much more – from the inaugural tournament at Uruguay 1930 to Qatar 2022.

WHEN ASIA WELCOMED THE WORLD
By Danny Lewis (Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

This is the story of the 2002 World Cup, a tournament that saw heart-warming stories and controversy intertwined. The book resurrects the great characters who lit up 2002's biggest footballing stage – Ronaldo, Oliver Kahn, David Beckham and Rustu Recber among them – and examines the tournament's controversies and huge giant-killings.

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Pressing at a premium

The heat and humidity at this summer's World Cup will make sustained pressing impossible

What is modern football? The answer will differ depending on the level of team but, fundamentally, the sides with a realistic chance of winning league titles play a controlled pressing game. It's not the ferocious pressing of Marcelo Bielsa or early Jurgen Klopp, but pressing – winning the ball back high up the pitch – is a huge part of it. These days, there is also the style that has grown up partially in response to that, which involves baiting the press, drawing opponents on, taking a risk that possession might be lost in order to create space behind the line of the press that rapid forwards can exploit. Both variants are extremely intense, and require players of almost preternatural fitness.

That raises an obvious question at the World Cup, much of which will be played in high heat and humidity. When that sort of high-intensity style becomes impossible, what follows? A report in *The Guardian* suggested that for six of the seven games scheduled for Miami, the wet-bulb temperature will definitely be above 26°C, which is the threshold beyond which the players' union FIFPRO have insisted cooling breaks be used. As many as 45 games of the 104 at the World Cup are predicted to reach 28°C. Quite apart from the understandable health concerns, that cannot but have an impact on the style of football played.

Heat centre...Miami's stadium is set to be one of the hottest at this summer's finals

> As many as 45 games of the 104 at the World Cup are predicted to reach 28°C. That cannot but have an impact on the style of football played

Sustained pressing will be impossible. This was apparent at the Club World Cup played in the US last summer, when many games fell into an oddly disjointed pattern: a flurry of activity and then a lull. There is a risk that teams who sit deep and look to absorb pressure will be advantaged. For them, sitting deep, camped in a low block, there will not be the same expenditure of energy, while opposing teams who might in cooler weather have been able to overwhelm them with sustained waves of pressing and attacking will be hampered. Tired football used to produce exciting games as defensive structures collapsed; more recently, as general fitness and organisation have improved, structures remain but attacking limbs become too wearied to make inroads against mass defences.

That could lead, particularly in the early knockout rounds, to very risk-averse, dull football. One of the reasons the last World Cup in Qatar was so engaging – on the pitch at least – was that it was played in (the northern hemisphere) winter. That meant both that temperatures were not oppressive – the average December temperature in Doha is 16-25°C – and that players based in Europe, which is to say, the majority of those playing for the nations with a realistic chance of success, were not exhausted by having completed a long season. Fresh players playing in clement conditions produce great football.

But that will not be possible in the United States, Canada and Mexico. All teams will have to adjust. This,

Set-piece specialists... corners could be crucial for England

of course, is a problem that has afflicted England throughout history (although they were also terrible in South Africa in 2010, when the southern hemisphere winter was especially chilly.) Almost all of England's worst performances have come in June, when they are tired from a gruelling season and the temperature rises: last June they scraped a 1-0 win over Andorra in Barcelona and then lost to Senegal in Nottingham, while the 4-0 defeat to Hungary at Molineux, the stand-out dire result of recent times, came in June 2022. That's not a full explanation, by any means, but it does offer some rationale as to why England's record in major tournaments is so disappointing.

England's assistant coach Anthony Barry spoke last year of the need to design a "heat-proof" style for the US. He was understandably reluctant to go into details, but it can be assumed it will be more sophisticated than 1970, when Alf Ramsey's adaptation to the challenges posed by the heat and altitude of Mexico was to play much slower, possession-based football. For England to do that now would be to reject the obvious strength of the Premier League, its pace and physicality, to adopt an approach with which opponents are more familiar and to which they are better suited.

The key will probably be focused pressing, which is to say pressing hard and high but in bursts, with rest periods in between. England can also make a virtue of set-plays which have been the defining feature of the Premier League this season. It's not just that, in Declan Rice and Bukayo Saka, they have two of the best deliverers of a set-play in European football; it's that, as Premier League champions Arsenal have shown, it's very possible to take 90 seconds or so about each set-piece – and that, strategically deployed, can be used to give players a rest.

If that doesn't sound especially thrilling, that's sadly how it's going to be. High temperatures and high humidity are not conducive to entertaining football. This World Cup could be a slog because of its length, but also because of its rhythm.

Hamza ABDELKARIM

(Egypt)

The 18-year-old has certainly experienced a whirlwind 2026. He joined Barcelona B on loan from Al Ahly in January, with the Spanish club having an option to make the move permanent in a deal reportedly worth up to €5 million.

Administrative delays ultimately prevented him from featuring for Barca B, forcing the talented forward to play for the club's U19 side instead.

Abdelkarim still managed to impress Egypt head coach Hossam Hassan though, scoring a hat-trick in a 9-0 win over Montecarlo and earning a place in the Pharaohs' provisional 2026 World Cup squad, picked ahead of Nantes striker Mostafa Mohamed.

The week of that announcement, Abdelkarim scored in the Copa de Campeones semi-final to help set up a youth *Clasico* in the final. It has been a remarkable rise since Barca first became aware of him during the U17 World Cup in Qatar last year, and that rise could become meteoric should he make an impact in North America.

Yuto NAGATOMO
(Japan)
The 39-year-old full-back was named in Japan's World Cup squad for a fifth consecutive finals, joining an elite group of players including Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Gianluigi Buffon, Rafael Marquez and Lothar Matthaus.

Ange-Yoan BONNY
(Ivory Coast)
The 22-year-old Internazionale forward was born in France and played 19 times for the country at youth level, but switched his international allegiance to *Les Elephants* after receiving FIFA approval in May.

Matias FERNANDEZ-PARDO
(Belgium)
In February 2025, the 21-year-old Lille forward requested a switch of international allegiance to Spain but didn't play a game at any level for *La Roja*, instead opting to switch back to his country of birth in May 2026.

Khalil AYARI
(Tunisia)
The 21-year-old winger joined PSG U23s on loan from Stade Tunisien in September 2025 and won his first international call-up in March 2026, making his senior debut against Canada.

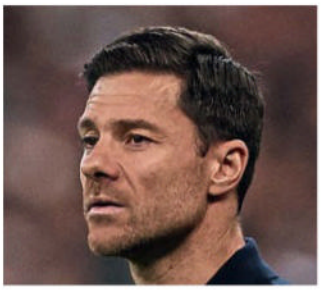
Turn to page 20 for more World Cup squad news and page 32 for 50 players to watch

"After four years full of challenges and hard work, it's time to move on. I leave with the feeling that the mission is complete. Four seasons, three championships"

Robert Lewandowski reveals that he's leaving Barcelona this summer after a successful spell in La Liga

12 MOVES *you might have missed...*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS



Xabi ALONSO

After leaving Real Madrid by mutual consent in January, less than eight months into his contract, Spaniard Alonso agreed to become the next **Chelsea** boss on a four-year deal.

Pep GUARDIOLA

The **Manchester City** manager left the club after ten years at the helm. Club stalwarts Bernardo Silva and John Stones also confirmed their exits upon the expiry of their deals.

Dick ADVOCAAT

After stepping down as **Curacao** head coach in February, the 78-year-old Dutchman returned to the role ahead of the World Cup following the resignation of Fred Rutten.

HULK

Fluminense confirmed the signing of the 39-year-old striker on a free transfer after he terminated his deal with Atletico Mineiro. The veteran has signed until the end of 2027.

Edin TERZIC

The former Borussia Dortmund coach, who had two separate spells in charge of BVB, agreed a two-year deal to replace Ernesto Valverde at Spanish outfit **Athletic Club**.

Gheorghe HAGI

The **Romania** great was appointed national team coach for a second time. Elsewhere, Andrea Maldera was hired by Ukraine, and Rwanda turned to Stephen Constantine.

Michael CARRICK

After guiding **Manchester United** to Champions League football next season, the Red Devils made head coach Carrick's spell at Old Trafford permanent on a two-year deal.

OSCAR

The ex-Chelsea and Brazil midfielder retired after being diagnosed with a heart condition. The 34-year-old had been playing for **Sao Paulo** following eight years in China at Shanghai Port.

Jermain DEFOE

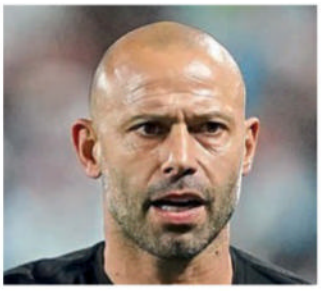
One of three ex-England stars, along with Ashley Cole and Jonjo Shelvey, to embark on a first head coaching role, taking over at **Woking**, Cesena and Arabian Falcons respectively.

Aaron RAMSEY

The 35-year-old retired after a spell without a club, having left Mexico's **Pumas UNAM** last year. He joined ex-Premier League stars Dimitri Payet and Ashley Young in retirement.

Andy ROBERTSON

The **Liverpool** left-back will follows Mo Salah out of the door at Anfield this summer after a successful spell on Merseyside. He joined the Reds from Hull City in 2017 for £8m.



Javier MASCHERANO

The ex-Liverpool and Barcelona midfielder stepped down as coach of MLS side **Inter Miami**. He took charge in 2024 and guided them to their first MLS Cup win in 2025.

Round-up in numbers

Check out the facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football…

3
Goals scored by 18-year-old forward Julian Hall for New York Red Bulls against Columbus Crew, making him the youngest player in MLS history to score a hat-trick.

4
Countries in Europe's top five leagues that Barcelona full-back Joao Cancelo has won a league title in, making him the first player in history to achieve the feat. Only France's Ligue 1 crown is missing from his trophy cabinet.

16
Years and 181 days, the age of Mezian Mesloub when he scored a minute into his debut for Lens to help secure Champions League football in 2026-27. In doing so, he became the second-youngest scorer in France's top flight.

13,000
Population of Elversberg, home of the team just promoted to the Bundesliga that will become one of the smallest clubs ever to compete in Germany's top flight.

Pitch invasion… Elversberg

21
Seconds it took Crystal Palace winger Ismaila Sarr to score in the Conference League semi-final v Shakhtar Donetsk – the fastest goal in the competition's history.

500
Internationals played by England women's team since their first "official" game in 1972 *(see page 66 to read about the Lost Lionesses)*.

30
Age at which Borussia Dortmund's Niklas Sule has chosen to retire after a series of knee injuries.

English champions… Arsenal lift the Premier League trophy

22
Years Arsenal had to wait between triumphant top-flight campaigns after winning the 2025-26 Premier League title *(our comprehensive 2025-26 European season review follows in next month's issue)*.

1
Number of female coaches to take charge of a team in one of Europe's top five leagues, after Marie-Louise Eta became the first following her appointment as interim head coach of Bundesliga side Union Berlin.

40
Years it took AGF Aarhus to reclaim the Danish title after they beat Brondby to secure silverware.

2030
Year to which international head coaches Graham Potter (Sweden) and Carlo Ancelotti (Brazil) have extended their contracts.

19
Home games won by Barcelona in 2025-26, making them the first team to win all 19 home matches in a 38-game La Liga season.

17
Years Seamus Coleman spent at Everton, with the Republic of Ireland right-back announcing he'll be leaving the club this summer.

106
Days Liam Rosenior spent as head coach of Chelsea after he was axed following just 11 wins in 23 games.

21
Premier League assists by Manchester United captain Bruno Fernandes in 2025-26, breaking the record for a single season.

70
Age of goalkeeper Angel Mateos Gonzalez, who became the oldest player ever to appear in an official match in Spain for CD Colunga in the country's fifth tier.

12
MLS clubs Sierra Leone forward Kai Kamara played for – a league record. The 41-year-old officially retired in May, bowing out as MLS' second all-time top goalscorer.

25,000
Goals scored in MLS regular season history after Nashville SC's Hany Mukhtar netted the winner in the 94th minute against Columbus Crew.

5
Tier in which Spanish side Cornella play, who are now owned by Lionel Messi after the Argentina legend acquired the club.

2
UEFA Youth League titles won by Real Madrid after they defeated Club Brugge on penalties in the 2026 final in Switzerland.

96
England caps won by Kyle Walker after the Burnley right-back announced his retirement from international football.

25
Years since Coventry City last played in the Premier League. The Sky Blues will once again play in England's top tier in 2026-27 after Frank Lampard's side won the EFL Championship.

10
Years it took Manchester City to win back the Women's Super League title, ending Chelsea's six-year stronghold on the trophy *(more on page 71)*.

23
Years Spain right-back Dani Carvajal spent at Real Madrid, with *Los Blancos*' captain set to leave the Bernabeu this summer upon the expiry of his contract.

250
Days which Hearts had sat top of the Scottish Premiership table, before being agonisingly overtaken by Celtic on the final matchday.

54
Years it took for Gornik Zabrze to reclaim the Polish Cup, with former Germany forward Lukas Podolski bowing out from playing after the victory and completing a takeover of the club.

116
Goals scored in all competitions for Chelsea by Australia striker Sam Kerr – a joint-all-time club record – who announced she will be leaving the club this summer.

1
English players to have featured in the Brazilian top flight after Jesse Lingard made his debut for Sao Paulo giants Corinthians.

History maker… Lingard playing for Corinthians

"Neymar underwent all the medical tests, which concluded with an MRI scan revealing a grade two calf injury, not just swelling. He is expected to be cleared in two to three weeks"

Brazil team doctor Rodrigo Lasmar gives an update on Neymar's fitness after he was injured just weeks before the World Cup

WORLD CUP 2026 SQUAD WATCH

Neymar recalled by Brazil

Brazil's record goalscorer is the headline name in *Selecao's* 2026 World Cup squad, but a calf injury threatens to scupper his comeback

● BRAZIL
The big news from Carlo Ancelotti's squad announcement was the recall of **Neymar**, who last played for *Selecao* in 2023, but a calf injury means he could miss the start of the tournament. The inclusion of Bournemouth's **Rayan** also caught the eye, while notable omissions included Chelsea duo Joao Pedro and Estevao, the latter due to injury.

● NETHERLANDS
Ronald Koeman's *Oranje* squad had a few big-name casualties with Matthijs de Ligt and Stefan de Vrij joining Jerdy Schouten and Xavi Simons on the injury list, while Liverpool's Jeremie Frimpong was left out. Frimpong's club-mates **Virgil van Dijk**, **Ryan Gravenberch** and **Cody Gakpo** did make the cut in a squad dominated by Premier League players, including **Jurrien Timber** despite the versatile Arsenal defender missing the majority of the run-in through injury.

● UNITED STATES
Eyebrows were raised among pundits of the co-hosts after MLS duo – attacking midfielder Diego Luna and teenage forward Zavier Gozo – were left out by Mauricio Pochettino. Lyon's defensive midfielder Tanner Tessmann also missed out. Players that did make the squad were **Joe Scally** and **Gio Reyna** (both Borussia Monchengladbach) and Liga MX forward **Alejandro Zendejas** (America).

● FRANCE
Didier Deschamps' last-ever *Les Bleus* squad saw him include Crystal Palace striker **Jean-Philippe Mateta** over Randal Kolo Muani in place of injured Liverpool forward Hugo Ekitike, but Real Madrid midfielder Eduardo Camavinga was a surprise big-name absentee.

● SWEDEN
Despite a truncated season for Liverpool due to injury, striker **Alexander Isak** was named in Graham Potter's 26-man squad alongside talismanic Arsenal No.9 **Viktor Gyokeres**, who spectacularly fired the Swedes through the play-offs.

● SWITZERLAND
Murat Yakin largely kept to the script for his Swiss squad, though **Christian Fassnacht** was rewarded for topping the domestic league's scoring charts at the expense of his Young Boys team-mates Alvyn Sanches and Joel Monteiro.

● ENGLAND
The focus of Thomas Tuchel's Three Lions' squad announcement centred more on those players who didn't make the cut, with a host of big names omitted – Phil Foden, Harry Maguire, Cole Palmer, Trent Alexander-Arnold, Morgan Gibbs-White, Lewis Hall, Adam Wharton and Jarrod Bowen. **Ollie Watkins** and **Ivan Toney** were both recalled as striker back-ups to **Harry Kane**, **Kobbie Mainoo** was preferred to James Garner in midfield, while Spurs full-back **Djed Spence** was a surprise inclusion.

Surprise recall...Ivan Toney has played just seven minutes under Thomas Tuchel

● TUNISIA
Sabri Lamouchi, who took over the Eagles of Carthage in January, continued his overhaul of the squad, including newly naturalised midfielder **Rani Khedira** in preference to 101-capped Ferjani Sassi, and naming a host of youngsters in the form of defenders **Omar Rekik** (24) and **Adem Arous** (21), and attackers **Rayan Elloumi** (18) and **Khalil Ayari** (21).

● JAPAN
The dark horses were dealt a huge blow after Brighton winger Kaoru Mitoma was ruled out with a hamstring injury.

● NORWAY
In-form Bodo/Glimt goalkeeper Nikita Haikin did not make Norway's squad after the ex-Russia U21 shot-stopper's request to switch nationality failed to get approval. Instead the uncapped **Sander Tangvik** (Hamburg) was included, while **Erling Haaland** and captain **Martin Odegaard** will lead the nation at their first World Cup finals since France '98.

"Diogo Jota's spirit, strength and example are the plus one and will always be the plus one. It [is] up to all of us to fight for Diogo's dream and for the example he always set in our national team"

Head coach Roberto Martinez on Portugal's "plus one" World Cup squad, a reference to late Liverpool forward Diogo Jota

Welcome back ...Manuel Neuer has returned as Germany's No.1

"Everyone knows the aura and quality Manu has, what he brings to a team. We're planning with him as our No.1"

Germany boss Julian Nagelsmann on Bayern Munich keeper Manuel Neuer's return to international football

GERMANY

Bayern Munich goalkeeper **Manuel Neuer**, who retired from international football after Euro 2024, made his return to the *Nationalmannschaft*. In other interesting selections from Julian Nagelsmann, in Serge Gnabry's absence Dortmund forward **Maximilian Beier** was picked in attack over Karim Adeyemi, Kevin Schade and Said El Mala, while **Nadiem Amiri** and **Felix Nmecha** were preferred to Anton Stach in midfield.

CROATIA

Despite fracturing a cheekbone in late April playing for his club Milan, Croatia captain **Luka Modric** was named in his nation's WC squad and will play at this summer's tournament at the age of 40.

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

Bosnia & Herzegovina skipper **Edin Dzeko** will join Modric in the exclusive 40-club, with only one other outfield player previously starring at the World Cup aged 40 – Cameroon's Roger Milla.

MOROCCO

New Atlas Lions head coach Mohamed Ouahbi oversaw a big shake-up of the squad with a host of names left out – Youssef En-Nesyri, Amine Adli, Eliesse Ben Seghir and Adam Masina. In come uncapped Eintracht Frankfurt winger **Ayoube Amaimouni-Echghouyabe** and Lille midfielder **Ayyoub Bouaddi**, who switched international allegiance from France, while ex-Manchester United midfielder **Sofyan Amrabat** was recalled.

PANAMA

There was dismay among some fans after Botafogo's teen sensation Kadir Barria was left out. Coach Thomas Christiansen opted instead for experience in attack in the form of **Alberto Quintero** (38), **Cecilio Waterman** (35), **Jose Fajardo** (32) and **Yoel Barcenas** (32).

IVORY COAST

Evann Guessand, who is the first player in history to win two European trophies in a single season – the Europa League with Aston Villa and Conference League with Crystal Palace – leads *Les Elephants'* attack, alongside new boy **Elye Wahi** and recalled winger **Nicolas Pepe**. Wilfried Zaha missed out, as did Martial Godo.

PORTUGAL

Cristiano Ronaldo is in line to play at a record sixth World Cup finals after being included in Roberto Martinez's squad.

Ready for a sixth World Cup...Portugal star Cristiano Ronaldo

COLOMBIA

The standout names in *Los Cafeteros'* World Cup party were 37-year-old ex-Arsenal goalkeeper **David Ospina** – at the expense of Kevin Mier – captain **James Rodriguez**, whose season has been interrupted by illness, and forward **Cucho Hernandez**, who was preferred to Rafael Santos Borre and Jhon Duran.

SCOTLAND

Scotland coach Steve Clarke sprang a couple of surprises in the form of Southampton striker **Ross Stewart** and **Findlay Curtis**, a teenage winger at Kilmarnock. But there was no place for Oli McBurnie, who fired Hull City to the Premier League, Middlesbrough poacher Tommy Conway (injured), nor Italian-based duo Lennon Miller (Udinese) and Kieron Bowie (Verona).

SPAIN

La Roja head to a World Cup without a Real Madrid player in their squad for the first time after defenders Dean Huijsen and Dani Carvajal were omitted by head coach Luis de la Fuente. Barca winger **Lamine Yamal** did make the cut despite suffering a hamstring injury in April, as did his club-mate **Gavi** after missing the majority of the season with a knee injury, but Fermin Lopez misses out after breaking a bone in his foot.

DR CONGO

Six British-based players made the Leopards' World Cup squad, including **Aaron Wan-Bissaka** (West Ham United), **Edo Kayembe** (Watford), **Noah Sadiki** (Sunderland), **Yoane Wissa** (Newcastle United), **Axel Tuanzebe** (Burnley) and **Aaron Tshibola** (Kilmarnock) – the latter replacing injured Hibernian centre-back Rocky Bushiri, while ex-Chelsea midfield prodigy **Gael Kakuta** also made the cut.

Squad announcements correct as of May 28. Full squad lists, including shirt numbers, will be included in August's World Cup review issue.

WORLD CUP REVIEW
✔ The FULL STORY World Cup 2026
✔ Every single match REVIEWED
✔ Every team ANALYSED
ISSUE AFTER NEXT: ON SALE JULY 31

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

David Raya (Arsenal)	27
Gianluigi Donnarumma (Manchester City)	8
Mike Maignan (Milan)	6
Anatoliy Trubin (Benfica)	6
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	4
Joan Garcia (Barcelona)	4
Mile Svilar (Roma)	3
Alisson (Liverpool)	2
Marco Carnesecchi (Atalanta)	2
Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	2
Oliver Baumann (Hoffenheim)	1
Jean Butez (Como)	1
Ugurcan Cakir (Galatasaray)	1
Lucas Chevalier (PSG)	1
Diogo Costa (Porto)	1
Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig)	1
Dean Henderson (Crystal Palace)	1
Luiz Junior (Villarreal)	1
Unai Marrero (Real Sociedad)	1
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	1
Geronimo Rulli (Marseille)	1
Matvey Safonov (PSG)	1
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	1

DEFENDERS

Gabriel (Arsenal)	27
William Saliba (Arsenal)	18
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	17
Nico O'Reilly (Manchester City)	16
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	14
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	14
Jurrien Timber (Arsenal)	13
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	10
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	9
Konrad Laimer (Bayern Munich)	9
Jonathan Tah (Bayern Munich)	8
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	7
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	7
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	6
Marc Guehi (Manchester City)	6
Manuel Akanji (Internazionale)	5
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	5
Matheus Nunes (Manchester City)	5
Josip Stanisic (Bayern Munich)	5
Marquinhos (PSG)	4
Nico Schlotterbeck (Borussia Dortmund)	4
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	3
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	3
Patrick Dorgu (Manchester United)	3
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	3
Jose Maria Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	3
Piero Hincapie (Arsenal)	3
Abdukodir Khusanov (Manchester City)	3
Marcos Llorente (Atletico Madrid)	3
Gianluca Mancini (Roma)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Jan Bednarek (Porto)	2
Yann Bisseck (Internazionale)	2
Joao Cancelo (Barcelona)	2
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	2
Eric Garcia (Barcelona)	2
Federico Gatti (Juventus)	2
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	2
Dean Huijsen (Real Madrid)	2
Gerard Martin (Barcelona)	2
Willian Pacho (PSG)	2
Benjamin Pavard (Marseille)	2
Matthieu Udol (Lens)	2
Illia Zabarnyi (PSG)	2
Nayef Aguerd (Marseille)	1
Rayan Ait-Nouri (Manchester City)	1
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Real Madrid)	1

Raul Asencio (Real Madrid)	1
Ridle Baku (RB Leipzig)	1
Alejandro Balde (Barcelona)	1
Lilian Brassier (Rennes)	1
Bremer (Juventus)	1
Diego Carlos (Como)	1
Alvaro Carreras (Real Madrid)	1
Matty Cash (Aston Villa)	1
Zeki Celik (Roma)	1
Diogo Dalot (Manchester United)	1
Sergino Dest (PSV)	1
Ousmane Diomande (Sporting)	1
Wesley Fofana (Chelsea)	1
Matteo Gabbia (Milan)	1
David Hancko (Atletico Madrid)	1
Alex Jimenez (Bournemouth)	1
Ferdi Kadioglu (Brighton)	1
Milos Kerkez (Liverpool)	1
Jakub Kiwior (Porto)	1
Ezri Konsa (Aston Villa)	1
Robin Le Normand (Atletico Madrid)	1
Jhon Lucumi (Bologna)	1
Harry Maguire (Manchester United)	1
Adam Marusic (Lazio)	1
Noussair Mazraoui (Manchester United)	1
Moussa Niakhate (Lyon)	1
Marco Palestra (Cagliari)	1
Strahinja Pavlovic (Milan)	1
Marc Pubill (Atletico Madrid)	1
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	1
Julian Ryerson (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Marcos Senesi (Bournemouth)	1
Malick Thiaw (Newcastle United)	1
Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Ben White (Arsenal)	1
Davide Zappacosta (Atalanta)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	33
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	24
Vitinha (PSG)	20
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	16
Rayan Cherki (Manchester City)	9
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	8
Pedri (Barcelona)	8
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	8
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	7
Lennart Karl (Bayern Munich)	6
Luka Modric (Milan)	6
Martin Zubimendi (Arsenal)	6
Arda Guler (Real Madrid)	5
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	5
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	4
Joao Neves (PSG)	4
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	4
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	3
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	3
Eberechi Eze (Arsenal)	3
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	3
Jens Petter Hauge (Bodo/Glimt)	3
Scott McTominay (Napoli)	3
Tijjani Reijnders (Manchester City)	3
Florian Wirtz (Liverpool)	3
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	2
Christoph Baumgartner (RB Leipzig)	2
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	2

Mikel Merino (Arsenal)	2
Felix Nmecha (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	2
Nico Paz (Como)	2
Morgan Rogers (Aston Villa)	2
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	2
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	2
Pablo Barrios (Atletico Madrid)	1
Marc Bernal (Barcelona)	1
Moises Caicedo (Chelsea)	1
Lucas Da Cunha (Como)	1
Kevin De Bruyne (Napoli)	1
Nathan De Cat (Anderlecht)	1
Pape Gueye (Villarreal)	1
Myles Lewis-Skelly (Arsenal)	1
Weston McKennie (Juventus)	1
Aleksandar Pavlovic (Bayern Munich)	1
Matteo Politano (Napoli)	1
Richard Rios (Benfica)	1

Alexis Saelemaekers (Milan)	1
Ismael Saibari (PSV)	1
Lazar Samardzic (Atalanta)	1
Matias Soule (Roma)	1
Aurelien Tchouameni (Real Madrid)	1
Warren Zaire-Emery (PSG)	1

FORWARDS

Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	55
Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	40
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	26
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	15
Raphinha (Barcelona)	12
Ousmane Dembele (PSG)	10
Luis Diaz (Bayern Munich)	10
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	9
Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (PSG)	6
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	5
Antoine Semenyo (Manchester City)	5

Deniz Undav (Stuttgart)	5
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	4
Viktor Gyokeres (Arsenal)	3
Julian Alvarez (Atletico Madrid)	2
Serge Gnabry (Bayern Munich)	2
Ademola Lookman (Atletico Madrid)	2
Donyell Malen (Roma)	2
Bryan Mbeumo (Manchester United)	2
David Neres (Napoli)	2
Victor Osimhen (Galatasaray)	2
Joao Pedro (Chelsea)	2
Florian Thauvin (Lens)	2
Marcus Thuram (Internazionale)	2
Kenan Yildiz (Juventus)	2
Karim Adeyemi (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Maghnes Akliouche (Monaco)	1
Matheus Cunha (Manchester United)	1
Brahim Diaz (Real Madrid)	1

Yan Diomande (RB Leipzig)	1
Jeremy Doku (Manchester City)	1
Desire Doue (PSG)	1
Estevao (Chelsea)	1
Kasper Hogh (Bodo/Glimt)	1
Rasmus Hojlund (Napoli)	1
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	1
Troy Parrott (AZ)	1
Vangelis Pavlidis (Benfica)	1
Marcus Rashford (Barcelona)	1
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	1
Benjamin Sesko (Manchester United)	1
Luis Suarez (Sporting)	1
Crysencio Summerville (West Ham United)	1
Igor Thiago (Brentford)	1
Ferran Torres (Barcelona)	1
Can Uzun (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Ollie Watkins (Aston Villa)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker (Germany), Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

OBITUARIES

Abdulrahman AL BISHI (1982-2026)
Saudi Arabia striker who won five caps for his country in 2004, including at the Asian Cup, and also starred for Al Nassr.

Roque AVALLAY (1945-2026)
Outstanding Argentina winger who helped Independiente win the Copa Libertadores in 1965 shortly after joining them. Scored goals steadily for Newell's Old Boys, Huracan under the legendary Cesar Luis Menotti, Atlanta, Chacarita Juniors and Racing. Also played 15 times for Argentina, scoring once.

Evaristo BECCALOSSI (1956-2026)
Inventive midfielder who won Serie A and the Coppa Italia with Internazionale, and the latter also with Sampdoria – all in the 1980s – yet played for Italy only at Under-21 and Olympic level.

Paying their respects...Inter honour Beccalossi

Srecko BOGDAN (1957-2026)
Defender with Dinamo Zagreb and Karlsruhe who won 11 caps for Yugoslavia then two for Croatia.

Stefanos BORBOKIS (1966-2026)
Only man to play for all four main clubs in Thessaloniki – Aris, Iraklis, Apollon Kalamarias and PAOK – but notably for the latter. Hit six goals in 29 games for Greece between 1988 and 1992 and was the brother of Vasilios Borbokis, who also played for PAOK as well as Derby County in the Premier League.

Billy CAMPBELL (1944-2026)
Northern Ireland right-winger, scoring one goal in six caps, from Belfast who moved to England with Sunderland then played in Scotland with Dundee, Motherwell and Hamilton Academical.

Marcos CONIGLIARO (1942-2026)
Exciting Argentinian attacker who won three Copa Libertadores titles, the Intercontinental Cup and Interamericana Cup with Estudiantes. Scored the winner in the 1968 Intercontinental Cup final first leg against Manchester United.

COQUITO (1965-2026)
Daniel Gregorio Rodriguez Lima won the Intercontinental Cup, Copa Libertadores twice and Uruguayan league title four times with Penarol in the 1980s. He won 12 caps for Uruguay between 1983 and 1985, and also played briefly in Austria with Rapid Vienna. His son, Alvaro Rodriguez, currently plays for Elche in Spain.

Alex CROPLEY (1951-2026)
Born in Aldershot, England, the midfielder won two caps for Scotland in 1971. Domestically, he made the bulk of his appearances for Hibernian, but also turned out for Arsenal, Aston Villa, Newcastle United, Portsmouth and Toronto Blizzard in Canada.

Former Arsenal midfielder...Cropley

Fleury DI NALLO (1943-2026)
Nicknamed "The Little Prince of Gerland", Di Nallo was an exciting forward who became Lyon's 222-goal all-time top scorer between 1960 and 1974. Netted eight goals in ten games for France between 1962 and 1971, including two on his debut v Hungary.

Michael ENERAMO (1985-2026)
Nigeria striker who scored three goals in ten caps for the Super Eagles. His club career started in Tunisia but took him to Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Laszlo FAZEKAS (1947-2026)
Forward who ranks among Hungary's most-capped players with 92 games (scoring 24 goals) between 1968 and 1983. Played in the 1978 and 1982 World Cups, scoring twice in the latter finals in the 10-1 win over El Salvador. Won nine league titles with Ujpest, his only domestic club, before moving abroad to Belgium with Antwerp.

Dominic FRIMPONG (2005-2026)
Ghanaian winger killed when his Berekum Chelsea team bus was attacked by armed robbers while returning from a domestic league match with Samartex.

Giancarlo GALAVOTTI (1947-2026)
Respected Italian journalist who was London correspondent for *La Gazzetta dello Sport* from 1979 to 2011.

Record holder... Godden in goal for West Brom in 1978

Tifo tribute...Lyon pay homage to Di Nallo

Super Eagles striker ... Nigeria's Eneramo

Hungary icon...Fazekas

Tony GODDEN (1955-2026)
Goalkeeper who played 329 times for West Bromwich Albion, including a record 228 consecutive appearances. Moved to Chelsea in 1986 and famously saved two penalties against Manchester United at Old Trafford, both awarded within minutes of each other. Was later caretaker manager of Rushden & Diamonds and also worked as a goalkeeping coach for Brighton.

Adan GODOY (1936-2026)
Goalkeeper who won the first of his 14 Chile caps in the third place play-off win over Yugoslavia in the 1962 World Cup, and was also a non-playing squad member in 1966 in England. Starred at club level with Santiago Morning.

Syed Habibul HASSAN (1942-2026)
Youngest member of India's team at the 1960 Rome Olympics aged just 18, and helped the Indians finish runners-up at the 1964 Asian Cup hosted in Israel.

Kazuo IMANISHI (1941-2026)
Japan defender with three caps in 1966 while playing for Tokyo Industries in the pre-J. League era. Later had two spells as Mazda coach before working for the JFA between 1994 and 2002.

Timo KAUTONEN (1945-2026)
Central defender who won 42 caps for Finland between 1964 and 1976, spending almost the entirety of his club career with Reipas Lahti.

Orhan KAYNAK (1970-2026)
Turkish forward who spent the majority of his club career in the nation's top tier, excelling at Trabzonspor and Kocaelispor, while he also won the second division title with Adanaspor and Samsunspor. Capped six times for Turkey Under-21s.

Hans-Jurgen KREISCHE (1947-2026)
One of the former East Germany's most outstanding players who spent his entire career with Dynamo Dresden. Kreische was top goalscorer in the Oberliga four times (1971 through to 1973 and 1976) and won the GDR championship five times. Scored a club record 188 goals in 344 games between 1964 and 1977. An Olympic bronze medallist in 1972.

Kees KUIJS (1931-2026)
Left-back who starred for NAC Breda and won 43 caps for the Netherlands between 1955 and 1962.

Alonso LOPEZ (1956-2026)
Colombia left-back who was capped 12 times between 1976 and 1985 including at the 1975 Copa America. Played the bulk of his club career with Millonarios.

Arturo LOPEZ (1935-2026)
Goalkeeper who played 20 times for Bolivia between 1957 and 1965, including the nation's 1963 Copa America success. Starred in club football for Chaco Petrolero.

Mircea LUCESCU (1945-2026)
Captain and left-winger with Romania at the 1970 World Cup, who won seven domestic league titles and the Romanian Cup with Dinamo Bucharest. His highly respected coaching career landed him major prizes with Dinamo and Rapid Bucharest, Galatasaray and Besiktas in Turkey, Zenit in Russia and then with Dynamo Kyiv and Shakhtar Donetsk in Ukraine *(full tribute on page 26)*.

Alex MANNINGER (1977-2026)
Goalkeeper who played 33 times for Austria between 1999 and 2009 and was part of their Euro 2008 squad on home soil. Enjoyed a busy club career with Grazer AK in his homeland, Augsburg in Germany plus Fiorentina, Torino, Siena and Juventus in Italy, but most fondly remembered for his spell at Arsenal where he stepped in for the injured David Seaman and helped the Gunners win the Premier League and FA Cup double in 1997-98.

Exceptional understudy...Manninger in action for Arsenal in the Premier League in 1999-2000

Billy McCULLOUGH (1935-2026)
Northern Ireland left-back who made more than 250 appearances for Arsenal between 1958 and 1966.

Borislav MIHAYLOV (1963-2026)
Major personality in Bulgarian football: goalkeeper-captain of the national team who finished fourth at the 1994 World Cup, and won 102 international caps. Claimed various silverware with Levski Sofia, Bulgarian Footballer of the Year in 1986, twice president of the national football federation and past member of the UEFA executive committee.

Jose NAVARRO (1948-2026)
Defender who helped Peru reach the second round of the 1978 World Cup and semi-finals of the 1979 Copa America. Won 30 caps between 1972 and 1979, playing most of his club career with Sporting Cristal.

Henry NEWTON (1944-2026)
England Under-23 midfielder who played more than 500 domestic league and cup games over a 15-year career between 1963 and 1978 for hometown club Nottingham Forest, Everton, Derby County and Walsall.

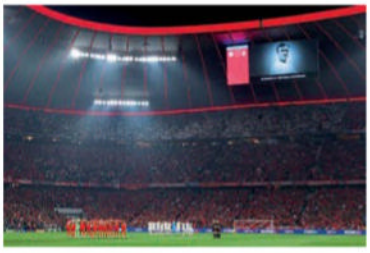
Henry NWOSU (1963-2026)
Youngest member of Nigeria's victorious 1980 Africa Cup of Nations squad and scored the only goal for the Super Eagles at that year's Moscow Summer Olympics.

Festus ONIGBINDE (1938-2026)
Coach of Nigeria when they were runners-up at the 1984 AFCON finals and again parachuted in for the 2002 World Cup where they did not make it out of the group phase. At club level he took Shooting Stars to the 1984 final of the African Champions Cup.

Tony PARKES (1949-2026)
Had a 34-year career with Blackburn Rovers as a player and coach, while also stepping in as caretaker manager on six occasions. He made over 400 appearances as a midfielder before working under 16 different managers, including Kenny Dalglish during the 1994-95 title-winning campaign.

Jose SANTAMARIA (1929–2026)
One of the world's finest central defenders in the 1950s and early 1960s. His starring role for semi-finalists Uruguay at the 1954 World Cup persuaded Real Madrid to sign him from Nacional, and he was the defensive cornerstone in the European Cup triumphs of 1958, 1959 and 1960. Won 17 major club prizes overall, including six La Liga titles. Played 20 times for Uruguay then 16 for Spain including at the 1962 World Cup.

He coached Espanyol for six years, including two top-four finishes, between 1971 and 1977, but quit coaching after leading Spain's disappointing World Cup hosting in 1982. Long-time loyal friend of both Alfredo Di Stefano and Ferenc Puskas. His death leaves winger Darcy Canario as the only surviving member of the Madrid team that beat Eintracht Frankfurt 7-3 at Hampden Park in 1960.


Remembered...Real Madrid and Bayern Munich pay tribute to *Los Blancos* legend Santamaria

First £1m footballer ...Savoldi in 1967

Blackburn Rovers legend...Parkes (R) with Graeme Souness

Bulgarian goalkeeping great...Mihaylov

Giuseppe SAVOLDI (1947-2026)
Italy striker who was the world's first £1 million footballer after being sold by Bologna to Napoli in 1975. Scored one goal in four games that year for Italy and ended his career with three Coppa Italia crowns. Serie A top goalscorer in 1972-73. His son, Gianluca, was also a professional footballer.

SILVINO Louro (1959-2026)
Goalkeeper who won 23 caps for Portugal between 1983 and 1997 while finishing on the losing side, with Benfica, in the 1988 and 1990 European Cup finals – the second as captain. Won four Portuguese league titles and three cups. Later enjoyed an outstanding career as goalkeeper coach under Jose Mourinho at Porto, Chelsea, Internazionale, Real Madrid and Manchester United.

Jose Mourinho's sidekick...Silvino Louro (R)

Peter SIMPSON (1945-2026)
Reliable central defender who helped Arsenal win the Inter-City Fairs Cup in 1969-70 then the league and FA Cup double a year later.

Gideon TISH (1939-2026)
Central midfielder who won the Asian Cup with Israel in 1964. Three times an Israeli league champion and cup winner once with Hapoel Tel-Aviv. Scored one goal in 36 internationals between 1958 and 1964 and was voted Israel's Footballer of the Year in 1963.

VICENTE Lucas (1935-2026)
Wing-half or central defender who earned a reputation as one of the few defenders able to keep Pele quiet by fair means rather than foul. Played more than 300 matches in a one-club career with Belenenses between 1954 and 1967. Forced into early retirement after injuring an eye in a car accident.

Eladio ZARATE (1942-2026)
Scored four goals in eight games in attack for Paraguay between 1959 and 1963. Made his name with Olimpia then moved to Argentina (San Lorenzo and Huracan) and Chile (Union Espanola and Universidad de Chile).

Words by Keir Radnedge, Mark Gleeson & Jared Tinslay

eye witness

Emanuel Rosu reports

ROMANIA

Romania says goodbye to a legend

Mircea Lucescu passes away after an extraordinary career

Cultured football manager Mircea Lucescu died on April 7, aged 80, just 12 days after leading Romania in Istanbul against Turkey in the 2026 World Cup play-offs. His passing does not merely represent the tragic end of an 80-year-old man with a complicated medical history. Despite battling illness, Lucescu was obsessed with leaving football and this world on his own terms.

The final whistle had just blown at the Besiktas Stadium in Istanbul. Turkey had beaten Romania 1-0 to qualify for the play-off final, which they would eventually win in Kosovo to secure their place at this summer's World Cup in North America. Turkey captain Hakan Calhanoglu walked directly toward Lucescu before joining his team-mates in celebration. The pair had worked together when Lucescu coached Turkey between 2017 and 2019, laying part of the foundations for the successful side now coached by Vincenzo Montella.

What followed was a moment rarely seen on a football pitch these days. Calhanoglu embraced Lucescu for almost half a minute, before making way for Montella and then for other players and members of the Turkish staff eager to pay their respects. Those emotional scenes went beyond football protocol. They represented Lucescu's farewell to the game on the very ground he had helped shape. In 2004, when he left Besiktas just a year after winning the league title, he agreed not to receive any compensation. In return, the club committed to investing that money into the construction of their new stadium.

After making a name for himself internationally as Romania's captain at the 1970 World Cup, Lucescu went on to enjoy an eventful coaching career that took him to Italy, Turkey, Ukraine, Russia and, naturally, his native Romania. He first attracted interest from Serie A clubs after guiding Romania to a hard-fought 1-0 victory over Italy in qualifying for Euro 1984. Lucescu was only 37 at the time, but defeating the reigning world champions to reach a final tournament featuring just eight teams dramatically enhanced his reputation.

Nicolae Ceausescu's communist regime refused to allow him to work abroad, but immediately after the bloody Revolution that ended the dictatorship, Lucescu moved to Pisa in 1990. Serie A was then the strongest league in Europe and the Romanian would go on to spend almost seven years there, coaching Pisa, Brescia, Reggiana and, briefly, Internazionale.

Lucescu spoke seven foreign languages and was already fluent in Italian by the time he arrived at Pisa, despite never taking formal lessons. Asked how he did it, he once smiled and said: "Football taught me everything. I used to ask foreign embassies to send me football magazines and newspapers, so I learned languages for fun. You didn't have many things to do under communism, you know."

Players saw him as a paternal figure who always had their development at heart. And his interest extended far beyond football. Lucescu made a point of learning key historical details and landmarks of every city his teams visited. He wanted to personally guide his players on the team bus upon

Romania legend... Lucescu during his final match in charge

arrival. He took his boys to museums, factories, mines and the theatre. "They need to know what's happening around them. They need to be connected to the beauty and also to the troubles of this world," Lucescu explained. "I had a hard time with my Brazilians at Shakhtar because they always wanted to skip the museums. But I was their bodyguard. I was always the last in the group so nobody could escape," he laughed.

Yet those who thrived under him do not remember him solely for his warmth. Lucescu was desperate to win and drew enormous energy from success. Across spells with Shakhtar Donetsk, Dynamo Kyiv, Galatasaray, Besiktas, Zenit Saint Petersburg, Dinamo Bucharest and Rapid Bucharest, he collected 35 major trophies. He remains third on the list of the most decorated managers in football history, behind only Sir Alex Ferguson and Pep Guardiola.

Listening to Lucescu often felt like hearing football history come alive. He exchanged shirts with Pele at the 1970 World Cup, faced England's world champions during the same tournament and later coached against Maradona's Napoli. He also launched Romania icon Gheorghe Hagi onto the international stage at Euro 1984. Later, he helped shape the careers of Diego Simeone, Andrea Pirlo and Shakhtar's celebrated Brazilian contingent of Fernandinho, Willian and Douglas Costa. During his 12 years at Shakhtar, he won the UEFA Cup. Before that, he had defeated Real Madrid with Galatasaray in the European Super Cup.

"If I don't have success, I'm dying," he admitted during a press conference only months before his passing. Lucescu was diagnosed with leukaemia in December 2025, a condition he wanted to keep secret so public attention would remain focused on Romania's attempt to reach the World Cup rather than on his illness. He was admitted to hospital three times between December and March before doctors finally allowed him to take his place on Romania's bench in Istanbul. His focus remained entirely fixed on the national team, to his family's desperation. Even while in hospital, he insisted on working and watched as much football as possible. When Lucescu's son, Razvan, the head coach of PAOK Thessaloniki, was told how serious the situation had become from a medical perspective, he immediately wanted to travel to Bucharest. Mircea stopped him, dismissing the illness as "nonsense" and insisting he would win the battle: first the one in Istanbul, then the one against his own body.

His optimism was so unwavering that those around him began doubting the alarming medical information leaking from hospital sources.

"What could be better than dying on a football pitch? I want that to happen because I can't stop doing what actually keeps me alive!" Lucescu said in an interview with the Romanian media more than a decade ago.

On March 29, three days after the game against Turkey, Lucescu collapsed during a tactical meeting with the players. He had been explaining the defensive mistake that led to the goal ending Romania's dream of returning to the World Cup after a 28-year absence. CPR was performed before an ambulance arrived. Lucescu was rushed to hospital, where doctors described his condition as serious but stable. Upon hearing the word "stable", Lucescu immediately asked to leave his hospital room and return to the team because he wanted to prepare for the upcoming friendly against Slovakia. The request was firmly rejected, although doctors promised he could return home within days if his condition did not worsen.

During a video call with his son, Lucescu also asked for arrangements to be made so he could travel to Greece and support Razvan in the Greek Cup final, where PAOK were scheduled to face OFI Crete. Yet on the very day he was expected to be discharged, a cardiac arrest shattered every optimistic prediction. Lucescu was placed in an induced coma and died days later.

"I had a wonderful life. For 80 years, everything was extraordinary. There were ups and downs, but I always pulled through. I find it hard to understand how everything can collapse in a few days," Lucescu said shortly before his death. "I couldn't have left the national team like a coward. Romania had a dream and I had a dream. And we were so close to making it happen."

> "I had a wonderful life. For 80 years, everything was extraordinary. There were ups and downs, but I always pulled through"
> **Mircea Lucescu**

His legacy, his immense passion, his restless curiosity, his ability to uplift players and the sense of duty he placed above his own suffering will forever mark a turning point in Romanian football history.

eyewitness

James Nalton reports

UNITED STATES

Searching for an identity

As New York/New Jersey prepares to host this summer's World Cup final, scratching the surface of the region reveals two new clubs beginning to sprout, emphasising just how deep soccer runs in these parts

Flares...Cosmos fans show their support for the new incarnation of the club

A stroll down a broad boardwalk by the sea, surrounded by funfairs and seaside glamour, partly faded, partly revived, might not be the first thing that springs to mind when you think of soccer in New York, as the city, or more accurately, the region, prepares to host the sport's biggest event this summer.

But it's in such a setting, away from the presented facade of Manhattan skyscrapers, that one of New York's two new professional teams, Brooklyn FC, plays its home games in a baseball stadium by the beach at Maimonides Park, Coney Island.

It's in these offbeat locations, away from the stock images, that soccer in the region often lives, and, as with the World Cup final venue itself, much of New York soccer lives across the Hudson River in a different state altogether, New Jersey.

Indeed, the other of those new teams, a revived version of the famous New York Cosmos, will call New Jersey home as the original Cosmos once did, but even on that boardwalk on Coney Island at Brooklyn's southern tip, there is a reminder of how nomadic the life of a New York City soccer club can be, and how it all links together eventually.

It's there, just a couple of blocks from Brooklyn FC's home ground, that there are remnants of the previous, middle version of the Cosmos. Some cracked paintwork over one of the more weathered restaurant fronts features a retro Pepsi Cola logo and, alongside it, an original New York Cosmos club crest with the slogan: "Coney Island is Cosmos country."

It's a reminder that the Cosmos, once of Pele and the 1970s North American Soccer League, were also once of Coney Island and the 2010s NASL, and played at Maimonides Park, then known as MCU Park, in 2017.

The latest, third iteration of the team, which kicked off this year in USL League One, the third tier of US soccer, feels like a much more local, low-key affair,

Hinchliffe Stadium ...home of the latest iteration of the Cosmos

but anything bearing the Cosmos name brings with it certain expectations.

To watch the new Cosmos, you will need to travel out of New York City, across the state line marked at this point by the Hudson River, to Paterson, New Jersey.

On the way, perhaps through the clouded windows of an NJ Transit train, you might glimpse the World Cup final venue that will host the eyes of the football world this July.

Meanwhile, the stadium the 2026 Cosmos have chosen to call home is perched at the top of the Paterson Great Falls National Historic Park, a dramatic waterfall that throws the Passaic River further towards the Meadowlands marshes on its winding path through northern New Jersey.

The World Cup final venue itself, situated amid those Meadowlands marshes, highlights the area's sporting quirks, the obstacles faced by professional sports teams in the region, and the often blurred boundary between New York and New Jersey identity when it comes to soccer.

Ahead of games this summer at the New York/New Jersey Stadium in East Rutherford, NJ, usually known as MetLife Stadium but renamed for the World Cup, you are unlikely to see many shots of New Jersey, and even fewer of the surrounding concrete fields that serve as car parks for the sports complex or the wetlands of the Meadowlands themselves. What you will see are the mammoth skyscrapers, iconic bridges and scenic parks where New York's grassroots soccer culture thrives.

The professional game, though, requires something more than a small space for a pick-up game or a public park for a semi-pro league match, and it is notoriously difficult for professional sports teams to find a home within city boundaries.

For soccer teams, finding a successful home in such a crowded sports market is challenging. This is why, for the first

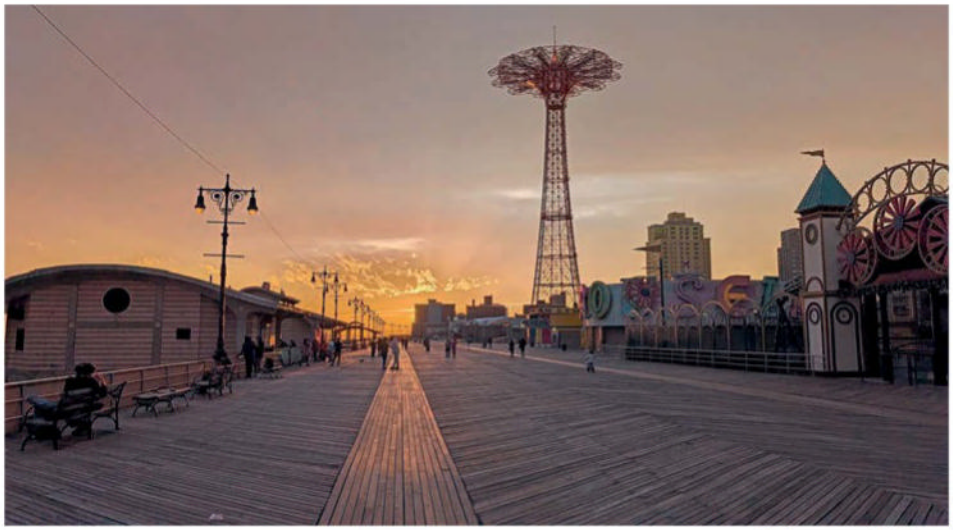
12 seasons of their existence, NYC's Major League Soccer team, New York City FC, have predominantly played their home games at Yankee Stadium, home of the New York Yankees baseball team, while some games, especially in more recent seasons, have been played at Citi Field, home of the city's other MLB team, the Mets.

It's also the reason the original MLS team to take the "New York" name, the MetroStars, now the Red Bulls, chose Harrison, New Jersey, as the location for their soccer-specific stadium, having originally played on the Meadowlands at Giants Stadium, which was demolished and replaced by MetLife Stadium on an adjacent site in 2010.

The original Cosmos of the 1970s, having played at various venues across New York City, including Yankee Stadium, also ended up playing at Giants Stadium to accommodate increased interest in the team following the arrival of Pele.

This northeastern part of New Jersey itself is one of the most historic soccer regions in the United States. The area from Newark Bay up the Passaic and Hackensack rivers has a long history of soccer, so much so that the town of Kearny, just up the road from Newark and the Red Bulls' stadium, earned the nickname "Soccer Town USA".

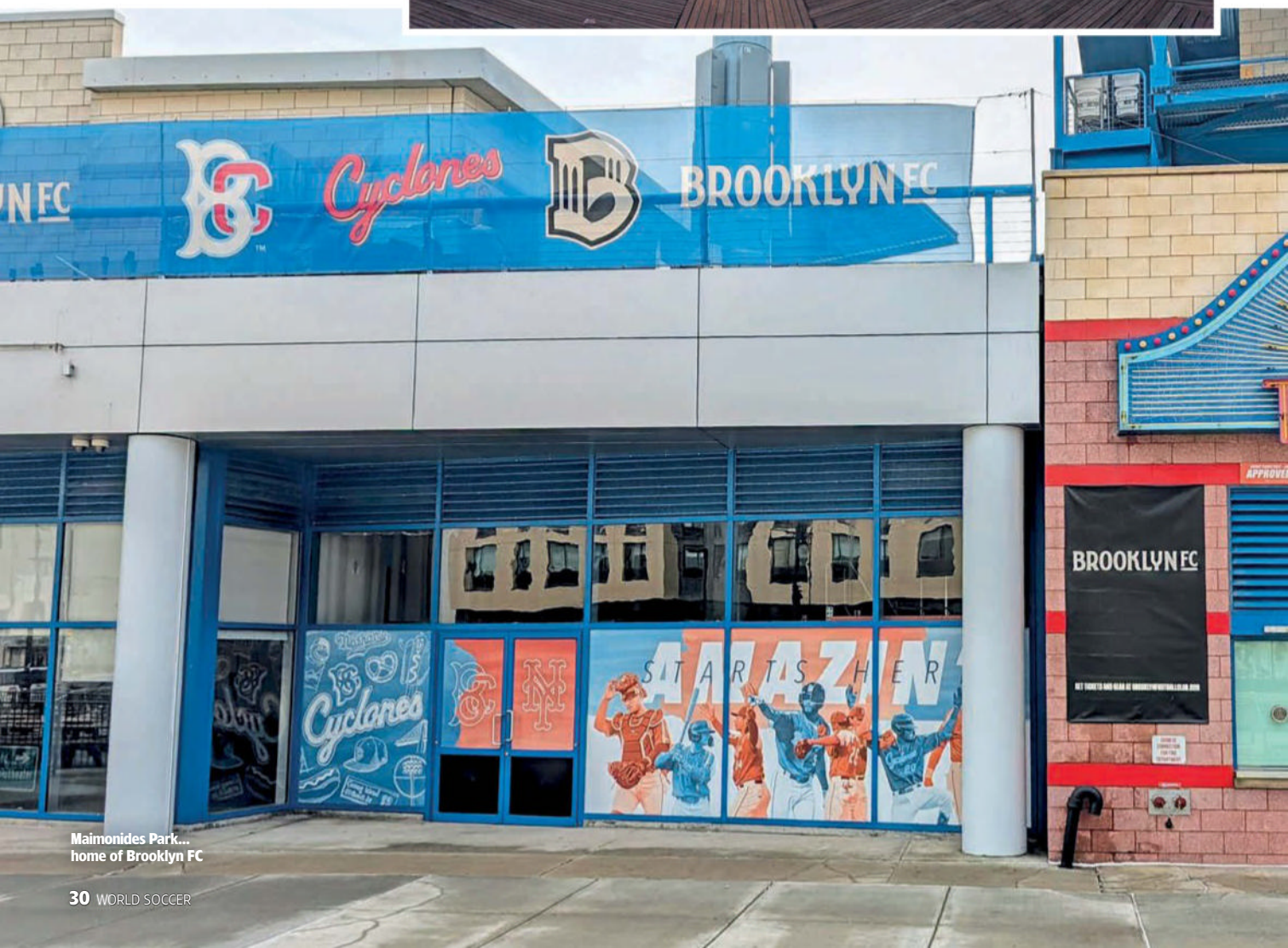
Hoboken FC 1912, who play in the Cosmopolitan Soccer League, comprising semi-pro and amateur sides, are one of the oldest clubs in the country, while teams from Paterson were also part of this early wave of soccer.



Coney Island boardwalk...a stone's throw from Maimonides Park

This is something the new Cosmos looked to play on, as they announced last year that they will play at the scenic Hinchliffe Stadium, hoping to incorporate a local identity alongside its historic New York, "Cosmos Country", Pele-driven persona.

"Officially, the club is still the New York Cosmos, but in the community, we're going to use Cosmos a lot," the



Maimonides Park... home of Brooklyn FC

CEO of the new team, Erik Stover, told *World Soccer* at the official unveiling at Hinchliffe Stadium in July last year.

"It mirrors history, as when the Cosmos left New York City in '77 and came to Giants Stadium, the state of New Jersey that ran the stadium made them take New York out of their logo, which [NFL teams] the New York Giants had to, and the Jets did too.

"The logo that most people recognise with the Cosmos is just 'Cosmos', so we took that as our inspiration, and we're carrying that same ethos forward too."

Supporters of previous iterations of the Cosmos gathered behind a goal for their inaugural home game, bringing flares, smoke, vocals and music to the home opener in unfamiliar territory.

Plenty of fans of the visiting team, Portland Hearts of Pine, one of the newer, well-supported teams at this level, gathered in impressive numbers in another part of the ground, having made their way down from Maine for this potentially historic game.

Whether the expectations of a team called the Cosmos can be met by playing out in Paterson, in the third tier of American soccer, and whether the combination of Paterson, North Jersey, New York and Cosmos identities can attract people to the club, both players and fans, remains to be seen.

Spotted...a sticker of the Cosmos crest at Paterson station

Brooklyn FC could have the clearest identity of them all, given they are named after just one of the five boroughs, and both their men and women's teams actually play in the area from which they take their name.

"For me, it was about building a team that was representative of a club, about a collective who care about playing here and playing for Brooklyn," the head coach of the Brooklyn FC men's team and NYC native, Marlon LeBlanc, told *World Soccer* after their inaugural game in March (a 1-0 victory against Indy Eleven at Maimonides Park).

"Did I look at what NYCFC do, and did I look at what [New York] Red Bulls do? No. Did I look at what the Brooklyn Nets do, what [New York] Knicks do? No. For me, it was about us being authentic and building a team in the image that was going to be authentic.

"I think we're built a little bit differently than the traditional USL team, and I wouldn't want to do it any other way. There's an authenticity about our borough that makes us a little bit different."

The scorer of the team's first-ever goal, Juan Carlos Obregon, added: "I think, from the beginning, we wanted to represent the borough of Brooklyn, and I think we have embraced that."

In setting up a home in that borough, Brooklyn FC, in the second-tier USL Championship, became the second professional men's team in New York City, along with NYCFC, while the women's team, playing in the USL Super League, became the second professional women's team in the region, along with Gotham FC of the NWSL who share the Red Bulls' home in Harrison.

NYCFC might be clearer in their own identity soon, as they are set to move into a new permanent soccer-specific home stadium at Willets Point in Queens, across the road from Citi Field, next year. Recent rumours suggest Gotham FC might move from New Jersey to join them.

Part of the beauty of New York as a soccer city is its diversity, not just of the teams and people who play it, but where it is played – its cosmopolitanism and its variation, from the seaside to the skyscrapers and from a park in the shadow of a grand bridge to a World Cup final venue in the middle of nowhere.

> Part of the beauty of New York as a soccer city is its diversity, not just of the teams and people who play it, but where it is played

This can also make it difficult for local teams to find an identity and a home, and even more difficult to make a success of it. The two newest additions to the New York soccer landscape will already know this, or will find out soon enough, as they fight to sell tickets at $20-$30 while, at the same time, just across a river from their adopted homes, the most popular and lucrative game in the sport takes place with match tickets selling for an average price closer to $20,000 at the clunky but aptly named New York/New Jersey Stadium.

"Coney Island is Cosmos Country"...a reminder of a past era

WORLD CUP 2026

ONES TO WATCH

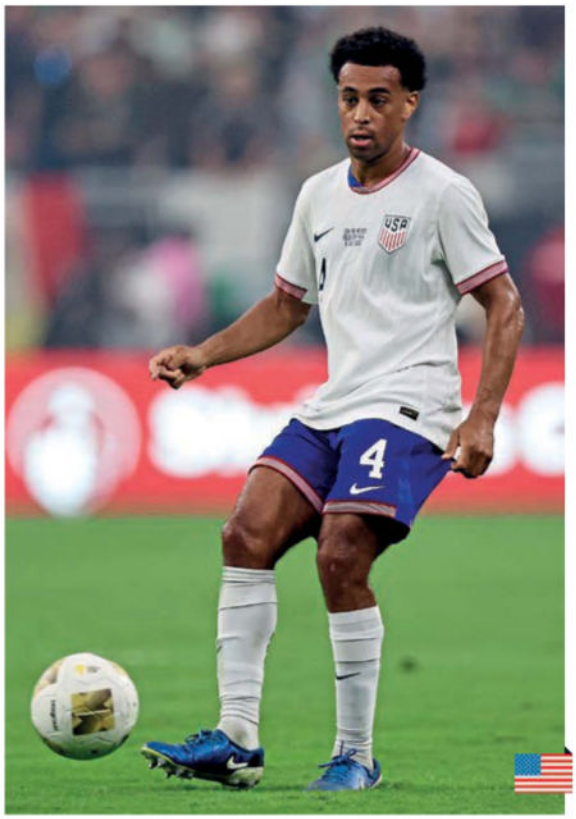
Nick Bidwell highlights 50 players to keep an eye on this summer

Tyler ADAMS
(United States)

One obvious takeaway from the United States' games over the past 12 months is that Mauricio Pochettino's side is not remotely as strong without the security blanket supplied by Adams.

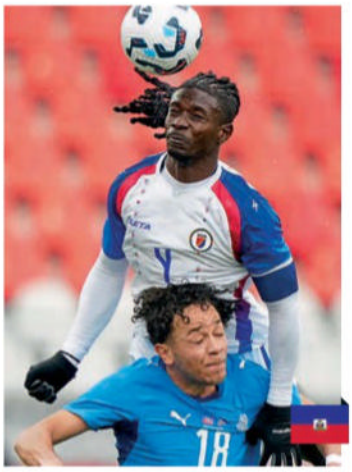
The classy Bournemouth defensive midfielder is a natural-born ball-hunter with a voracious appetite for breaking up opposition attacks and more than 50 caps of international experience. The problem, as Pochettino is sure to admit, is that the New York native has barely played for the US in recent months, missing the October friendlies for personal reasons – he and his wife were expecting their second child – then withdrawing from the next two squads because of a head injury and a thigh complaint. On the national team missing list since September 2025, he does run the risk of being undercooked as the US look to make their mark as World Cup co-hosts.

Such an important performer for both the USMNT and Bournemouth, Adams is the unsung hero personified, his value as warrior-cum-enforcer only truly apparent when he is not around. His one and only flaw is his tendency to regularly pick up injuries. He sat out almost the entirety of his first season in England (the 2023-24 campaign) with recurring hamstring/back trouble and had to spend a couple of months in rehab this winter after tearing a medial knee ligament.



His return to action in February was therefore timely, as he helped his club go on a stunning 18-game unbeaten run to finish in sixth in the Premier League – just outside the Champions League places – and secure European football for the very first time.

The captain of the national team at the 2022 World Cup – at just 23, he was the youngest skipper at that tournament – the ex-Leeds United, RB Leipzig and New York Red Bulls star likes to see himself as the keeper of the team's competitive flame. Adams has rightly pointed out that the US must find another gear when facing the great and the good of the world game, that they must put an end to a run of eight straight losses to European sides. If they are to do just that, their midfield enforcer will be essential.



Ricardo ADE
(Haiti)

Long-serving defender whose combativeness and spirit were key components in Haiti's first qualification in 52 years. After a nomadic career, he now plays for LDU Quito in Ecuador, with whom he has won two titles and a Copa Sudamericana. The World Cup will be the biggest test of his career.

Akram AFIF
(Qatar)

Good enough to be voted Asia's Player of the Year in both 2019 and 2023, the Al Sadd left-winger's pace, dexterity on the ball and lethal finishing have rendered him a Gulf superstar. A chip off the old block, his father once played for the Somalia national team.

Thiago ALMADA
(Argentina)

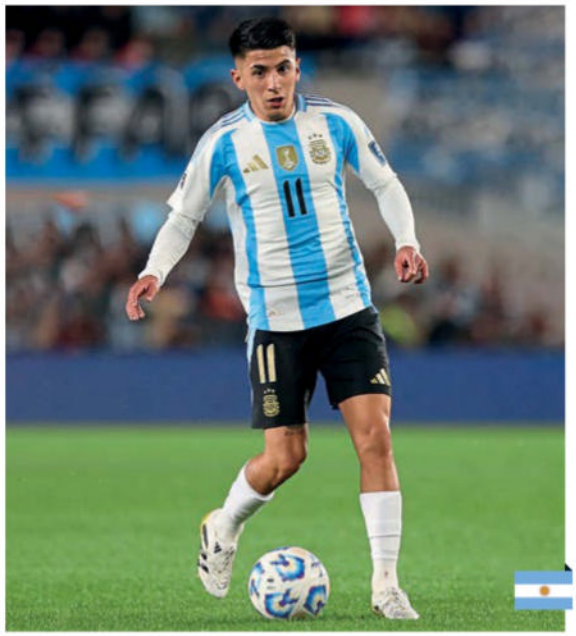
The Atletico Madrid left-winger, who spent only six minutes on the pitch in his nation's World Cup triumph at Qatar 2022, made a much more substantial contribution as *La Albiceleste* finished top of the pile in the qualifiers for this year's main event.

A vibrant attacking counterweight to the likes of Lionel Messi, Julian Alvarez and Lautaro Martinez, Almada delivered the goods throughout South America's marathon programme, hitting the winner against Uruguay in Montevideo, featuring in the 4-1 home thrashing of Brazil, laying on the only goal of the game for Alvarez in Chile, and netting a late equaliser in a 1-1 home draw with Colombia.

For all his silkiness, Almada is not short on toughness, hailing from the same Fuerte Apache quarter of Buenos Aires that produced Carlos Tevez. Even so, he has struggled to convince his club manager Diego Simeone, who has given him limited opportunities since signing him for €21m last summer. Inevitably, Almada's confidence has taken a hit.

Argentina boss Lionel Scaloni now has a difficult decision to make: does he stick with a player who has never let him down, who seems to save his best displays for the national team? Or replace him with someone less ring-rusty?

"You just analyse the football and see if they are performing at the level we expect of them," said Scaloni. "It's worth saying that he is an important footballer for us. Performances will decide in the end." Not so long ago, Almada had club football on a string, sensational in MLS with Atlanta United and one of the architects of Botafogo's Copa Libertadores conquest in 2024 before spending the second half of last season at Lyon in Ligue 1.



Salem AL DAWSARI
(Saudi Arabia)

Iconic Saudi winger and skipper. A man for the big occasion, scoring twice in Qatar (against Argentina and Mexico), before playing a prominent role as his club Al Hilal became the first Saudi outfit to reach the final of the Club World Cup a few weeks later.

Mousa AL TAMARI
(Jordan)

With Yazan Al Naimat ruled out and Ali Olwan struggling to be fit for the World Cup, Jordan will be banking on Al Tamari to lead their attack. The left-footed right-winger is the only Jordanian playing in a top European league, regularly contributing goals and assists for Rennes in France.

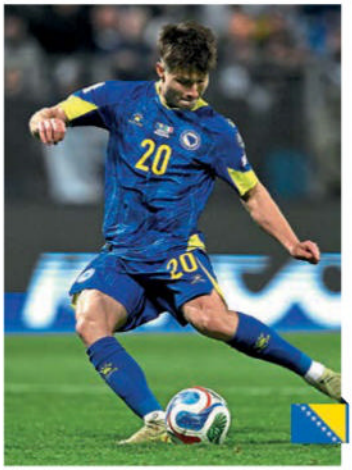
Elliot ANDERSON
(England)

Wherever he has laid his head coach's hat, England boss Thomas Tuchel has never been one to build a team based on grandiose player reputations or the hive mentality of the pundit class. What matters to the German is the creation of a complementary, tight-knit collective. Hence his faith in the relatively low-profile Nottingham Forest youngster Anderson who, over the last year, has emerged as one of the anchors of the Three Lions midfield, usually paired alongside Declan Rice.

Tuchel loves a deep-lying central midfield playmaker, and as far as the ex-Borussia Dortmund, Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea and Bayern Munich boss is concerned, the 23-year-old Anderson fits the bill perfectly. With positional smarts, technical poise, lashings of energy and grit in the tackle, he is regarded by Tuchel as "more of an eight than a six", though basically serves England as the more defensive-minded of the twin pivots, freeing up Arsenal megastar Rice to push forward.

"Anderson is a key player for us at the moment," says Tuchel. "He is one of the best midfielders in the Premier League – that's why he is with us and starting for us. He deserves it because he's been nothing but impressive. He's a very complete and mobile midfielder and that's what he keeps showing me."

The general consensus seems to be that it's just a matter of time before Anderson's time at Forest comes to an end – every top side in England seems to have designs on him, and the fight for his signature could be bloody. A price tag of over £100m has been mooted, which would represent a huge profit on the £35m Forest paid Newcastle United for him two years ago.



Esmir BAJRAKTAREVIC
(Bosnia & Herzegovina)

While the PSV winger, still only 21, has a tendency to be a little too individualistic at times, on his day he has the skills and imagination to threaten any defence. American-born, Bajraktarevic started out at New England Revolution and represented the US at various youth levels prior to joining the Bosnia camp in 2024.

Jose CORDOBA
(Panama)

Acquired by Norwich City in June 2024 from Bulgarian outfit Levski Sofia, the 25-year-old centre-back initially looked out of his depth in England's second tier, only to spectacularly transform himself into one of the top defenders in the Championship under new Canaries boss Philippe Clement.

Tajon BUCHANAN
(Canada)

Electric Villarreal right-winger Buchanan, who has proven himself just as important to Canada's attacking play as captain Alphonso Davies on the left wing, seems to have come back even stronger after suffering a freak leg break during a national team training session at the CONCACAF Gold Cup in the summer of 2024.

His injury, a fractured tibia, was a calamity in more ways than one for the Ontarian wide-man of Jamaican lineage. Not only did he have to endure five months of toil and sweat on the recovery trail, the lay-off also effectively scuppered his chances of a rosy future at Internazionale just a few months after joining the Italian giants from Belgian outfit Club Brugge.

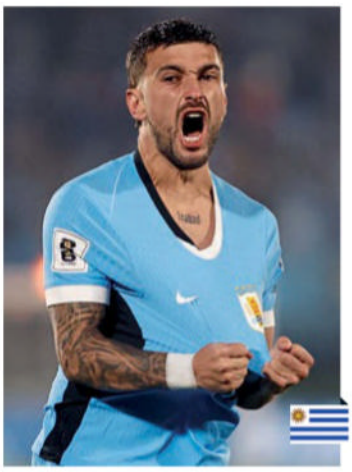
After Canada head coach Jesse Marsch whispered in his ear that he would likely have to look elsewhere for regular first-team football, Buchanan successfully negotiated his release from the *Nerazzurri*. In February 2025 he duly signed for Spanish club Villarreal, first on loan, then went on to secure a permanent deal later that summer after impressing at the Estadio de la Ceramica.

The switch has worked out well. Buchanan has been a regular for the Yellow Submarine and is clearly enjoying his football, particularly when scoring a hat-trick against Girona last August – his first-ever treble as a professional – making him the first Canadian to register a hat-trick in La Liga. He has been to hell and back, but has come through the trial by fire unscathed and hungrier than ever.

"Not everything goes the way you want it to go," the 27-year-old told the Canadian state broadcaster *CBC*, when speaking about his injury and the arduous journey back to full fitness. "That moment got me to where I am today. I got stronger. I got my mind right and got back to my best level. For my whole life, people have counted me out. My mentality always has been to prove them wrong." International tournaments bring the best out of him, achieving breakout status at the 2021 Gold Cup – winning the tournament's Best Young Player award – and excelling again at the World Cup in Qatar four years ago.

Samu COSTA
(Portugal)

Highly competitive Mallorca defensive midfielder, 25, who massively enhanced his reputation for the national team with two fine performances against Mexico and the United States in March. Ultra-aggressive in the tackle, excellent in his positional play, and composed on the ball.



Giorgian DE ARRASCAETA
(Uruguay)

The intelligent playmaker, a three-time winner of the Copa Libertadores with Rio heavyweights Flamengo, is finally replicating his club form on the international stage. The 31-year-old schemer provides the connective tissue for *La Celeste*, specialising in decisive passes and vision between the lines.

Charles DE KETELAERE
(Belgium)

With Belgium's record scorer Romelu Lukaku, nominally the national team's first-choice spearhead, continuing to struggle against the hamstring and hip problems which have sidelined him for most of the season, there's every chance that De Ketelaere will get his chance to lead the line for the *Diables Rouges* this summer as Belgium embark on their fourth consecutive World Cup.

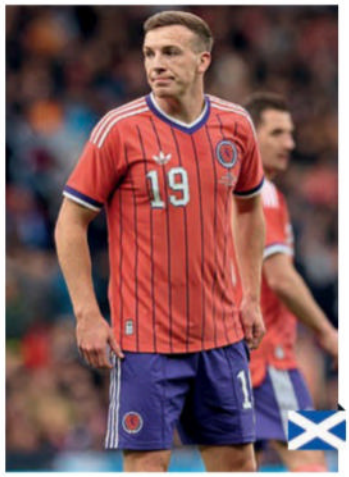
De Ketelaere, formerly with Club Brugge, usually plays for Serie A side Atalanta as an attacking midfielder, but adapted well in the false nine role in the latter part of World Cup qualifying. He now appears to have seen off the other contenders for the brief of emergency line-leader: Arsenal's Leandro Trossard (who has far more to offer playing out wide), and Michy Batshuayi (Eintracht Frankfurt), Lois Openda (Juventus) and Lucas Stassin (Saint-Etienne), with the trio all failing to make the cut for Rudi Garcia's final 26-man World Cup squad.

De Ketelaere, who has three goals and as many assists in five centre-forward starts for his country, has plenty going for him at the point of attack: tall, technical, a quick-thinker, excellent at holding the ball with his back to goal and much more robust in duels than he is often given credit for.

"I don't know if I feel like the number one striker in the absence of Lukaku," declared De Ketelaere, "but I did gain a lot of confidence during our World Cup qualifying win in Wales. I feel comfortable in attack. It doesn't really matter where I play, but it would be good to be able to carry on as the nine. I can play behind the frontline or out wide, but I feel good at the moment as the centre-forward and I think the coach sees it too."

Yan DIOMANDE
(Ivory Coast)

Spectacular and so hard to pin down, the 19-year-old was quite possibly the best dribbler in the entire Bundesliga this past term for RB Leipzig. At a time when the Ivorians lack a prolific out-and-out striker, the winger's penetrative powers and goalscoring class will be crucial.



Lewis FERGUSON
(Scotland)

The chance to take part in a World Cup finals – an all-too-rare opportunity for Scottish players – will feel all the more sweeter for the Bologna captain after the midfielder was cruelly forced out of Euro 2024 with a cruciate ligament injury.

Issa DIOP
(Morocco)

Morocco, semi-finalists at the last World Cup, have been busy of late recruiting a gaggle of dual-nationality players for the Atlas Lions squad, and arguably the most important of the naturalisation brigade is Fulham centre-back Diop.

Hailing from the French city of Toulouse, Diop began his pro career there and earned numerous youth caps for France. The 29-year-old, who has a Moroccan mother and Senegalese father, was once quoted as saying that he was only interested in playing for *Les Bleus*, declaring: "I was born in France, I am French and owe everything to France. Choosing another national team because I wasn't in the France reckoning would be a little bit hypocritical on my part."

So what a surprise it was when the announcement filtered through in spring that the giant, athletic stopper had agreed to fly the Morocco flag, going on to represent the North Africans in March friendlies against Ecuador and Paraguay. Freshly-installed Morocco boss Mohamed Ouahbi says he was aware of Diop's views on national team preferences, but still thought the Fulham man was worth talking to. "I wanted to listen to him and I found him very honest and sincere," said Ouahbi. "He told me he didn't want to be an opportunist, that while he had wanted to play for France in his younger days, he had not spoken out against Morocco.

"We're only looking forward now. He's got on board with our project, he's really enthusiastic about it. He will be a big help to the youngsters we have in central defence. I'm sure that he's going to be very positive for us. We've welcomed him with open arms."

Diop's significant experience in the Premier League (170-odd games for West Ham United and Fulham) should prove a boon for the Moroccans.

Arda GULER
(Turkey)

At the tender age of 21, Guler is already in his third season at Real Madrid and is very much the young street player made flesh: exuberant, effortlessly imaginative and utterly fearless. The pressure of elite competition has no effect on him whatsoever and he has proved it time and time again this past year, notably setting up Turkey's winner in the play-off semi-final against Romania – an inch-perfect through ball to Ferdi Kadioglu – and dazzling for Madrid in Champions League outings versus Manchester City and Bayern Munich.

Variety is the spice of life and the fresh-faced youngster can do it all: incisive winger, deep-lying controller of operations – a role he excelled in against City – or the arch-opportunist brief he embraced in the 4-3 loss to Bayern at the Allianz Arena, netting from long distance after intercepting an ill-judged Manuel Neuer pass, then curling in a sublime free-kick. No wonder all of Turkey went into panic mode recently when he limped off during a La Liga game against Alaves, later diagnosed with a thigh injury that ended his domestic season.

The Bernabeu medical staff expect him to be fit and firing for the summer, a huge relief to his international head coach Vincenzo Montella. The former Italy striker has been full of praise for Guler, both for his talent and his versatility, making him a central part of the national team and declaring him to be alongside Spain's Lamine Yamal as one of the leading young talents in world football today. This summer, Guler has the opportunity to prove his coach right.

Saman GHODDOS
(Iran)

A midfielder renowned for his technical ability, silky invention and free-kick mastery, Ghoddos' sporting life has been that of the globetrotter, playing in Sweden – the country where he was born to Iranian parents – France (Amiens), England (Brentford) and the UAE (Kalba).

Erling HAALAND
(Norway)

What to say about the finishing machine? As well as scoring in industrial quantities for Manchester City, Haaland netted an incredible 16 times in Norway's World Cup qualifying campaign, on target in all eight of his nation's matches. If he's on song, Norway could be unstoppable.

LEE Kang-in
(South Korea)

While as committed as ever to the team ethos, the lively Paris Saint-Germain attacking midfielder or right-winger may also be on a distinctly personal mission in North America this summer: to prepare the groundwork for a potential Parc des Princes exit ahead of the upcoming transfer window.

Underwhelmed by his relatively scarce amount of game time with the Parisians, the 25-year-old former Valencia and Mallorca star, who has spent the past three seasons in the French capital, is said to be open to a change of scenery – a signal which has already been received loud and clear by the likes of potential suitors Atletico Madrid, Napoli and a host of big-spending Gulf sides.

PSG certainly appreciate the South

Korean's ability to make an impact as a domestic league stand-in or all-purpose supersub, and by all accounts would be happy to extend his current deal (which runs until 2028). But understandably, playmaker Lee remains more than a little dissatisfied, particularly unhappy with his lack of minutes on the Champions League front, where he has not started a single match. The harsh truth is that he was never going to supplant the golden attacking quartet of Ousmane Dembele, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, Desire Doue or Bradley Barcola; too much competition for any player.

Capped on 46 occasions and scoring 11 goals since his Taegeuk Warriors debut in 2019, Lee will be keen to showcase his wares on the biggest stage of all this summer: his tremendous technical gifts, great ball-retention skills, fine range of pass and the all-too-rare ability to create chances out of thin air. South Korea's Player of the Year in 2025.

Aymen HUSSEIN
(Iraq)

The days of World Cups unearthing complete unknowns are mostly in the past, but defenders might be in for a shock from Iraq's rugged, aerially-strong 30-year-old striker. Hussein has a strike rate of 33 goals in 93 caps, including eight in the qualifiers for these WC finals.

Nestory IRANKUNDA
(Australia)

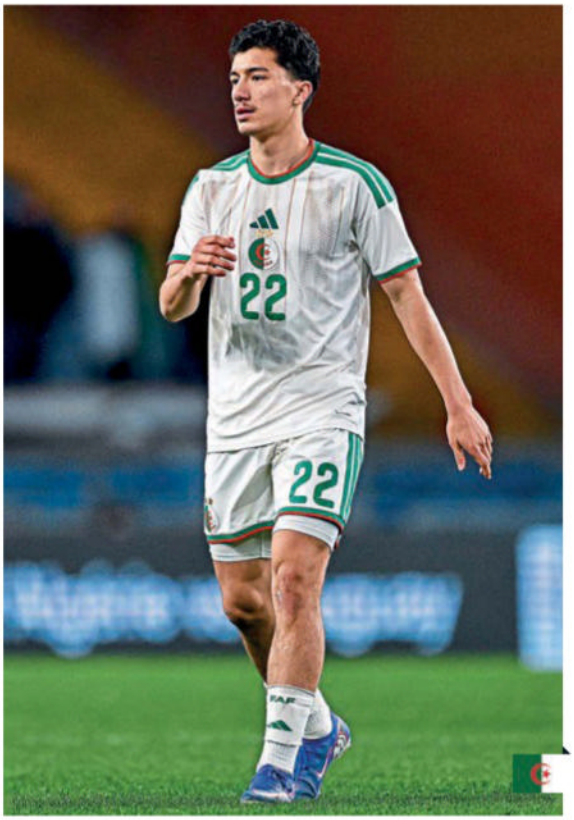
The 20-year-old winger's outstanding work for Watford has turned him into red-hot property. Born to Burundian parents in a Tanzanian refugee camp, he learned his soccer chops in Adelaide, before a spell with Bayern Munich's B team. Blessed with tricky feet and pace to burn.

Ibrahim MAZA
(Algeria)

Group J – featuring reigning world champions Argentina plus Algeria, Austria and Jordan – will be part casting venue, part auction room for the talented 20-year-old midfielder. Less than a year after joining Bayer Leverkusen in a €12m deal from second-division Hertha Berlin, Maza reportedly has a host of Premier league clubs on his trail, as well as Spanish and Italian sides.

Leverkusen, who have Maza under contract until 2030, are sure to retort that the youngster is not for sale. The all-important question, however, is will they be able to resist if and when a mammoth offer is put on the table?

Maza's first campaign at the BayArena generally has been one of surprises. Known as an attacking midfielder, he did not cut an overly impressive figure early in the season. Yet all was to change in December when head coach Kasper Hjulmand decided to try him in an unfamiliar role as one the two holding midfielders. In a development that no one saw coming, he suddenly took flight, giving the impression he had been playing there all his life. Notably to the fore in Champions League fixtures against Benfica and Manchester City, here was a totally new Maza, biting into the tackle and playing with lots of discipline. A more withdrawn habitat decidedly suits him, a position where he can better exploit his vision, technique and ability to find solutions in tight spots.



For Algeria, however, Maza – dubbed "Mazadona" by fans thanks to his silky skills – often plays more advanced, usually in the No.10 role behind the main striker, and it will interesting to see if he can shine back in that role this summer.

The Berlin-born son of an Algerian father and Vietnamese mother, he played for Germany at various youth levels before deciding to throw in his full international lot with the Algerians in the autumn of 2024. "I'm a multi-cultural kid with three different nationalities," he said. "I love all three countries and, in the end, made my decision for several different reasons – which are private."

Rani KHEDIRA
(Tunisia)

Twelve years after his brother Sami lifted the 2014 World Cup, Rani is about to tread the same elite boards. A dual German-Tunisian citizen and ex-German youth international, Rani only agreed to the switch earlier this year but should do a great job anchoring Tunisia's midfield.

Caleb YIRENKYI
(Ghana)

The 20-year-old midfielder, who plies his trade in Denmark with Nordsjaelland, was predominantly deployed at right-back by ex-Ghana coach Otto Addo, but could be set for a brief in his natural position under new boss Carlos Queiroz. Came through the Right To Dream academy.

Konrad LAIMER
(Austria)

One of the most underrated players in European football today, the Bayern Munich man is as valuable at right-back as he is in midfield. The 29-year-old performs a similar role for Austria, and his ability to drive the team forward will be crucial this summer.

Dailon LIVRAMENTO
(Cape Verde)

The Dutch city of Rotterdam, home to a large Cape Verdean community, was where Livramento caught the football bug. A hustling, athletic and direct striker who loves to run forward, he has represented the country of his parents since 2024 and will lead the debutants' counter-attacks this summer.

Gilberto MORA
(Mexico)

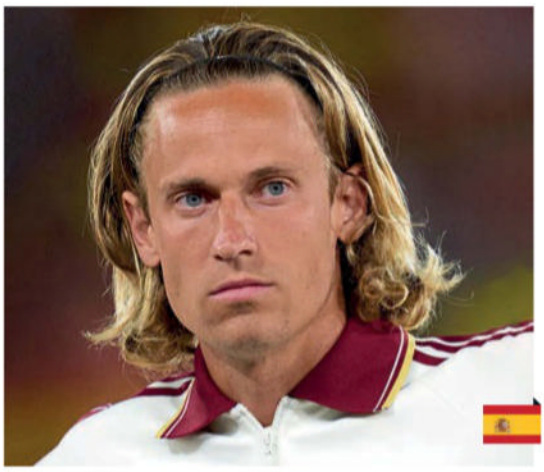
As one of the 2026 World Cup co-hosts, Mexico have all manner of extra pressures to deal with. But don't expect the teenage Mora, a highly gifted attacking midfielder, to be affected by the weight of expectations.

Only 15 when he made his top-flight bow for Tijuana in 2024 and a senior national team debutant just a year later, the free-wheeling youngster is an inhibition free-zone, never afraid to wheel out his awesome array of feints, nutmegs and swerves. A natural-born gift from the gods, he is irrepressible at times, driving markers to distraction with his quick feet, velvet touch and low centre of gravity.

Mexico's triumph in the 2025 CONCACAF Gold Cup was very much his coming-of-age party, making his first full appearance for *El Tri* in the quarter-final against Saudi Arabia, setting up Raul Jimenez for the only goal of the game versus Honduras at the semi-final stage, and again showcasing his soft-shoe talents in the 2-1 victory over perennial regional rivals the United States in the final. Multiple national team records have fallen his way too: the youngest Mexican to record an assist, the youngest debutant in the national team's history, and the youngest player to win an international trophy (aged 16 years and 265 days) – surpassing Lamine Yamal, who won the European Championship in 2024 with Spain, and Pele, who claimed the 1958 World Cup with Brazil, both at the age of 17.

"Mora has a great mentality and is a great asset for us," declared Mexico head coach Javier Aguirre at the Gold Cup last summer. "He's well-educated, respectful and wants to learn all the time. He's an uncut diamond, his potential doesn't have a ceiling."

From the town of Tuxtla Gutierrez in the south-west of the country, young Mora was sidelined for a couple of months recently by a sports hernia. But now, much to the relief of Mexico's supporters, he has fully recovered. "My rehabilitation took a little longer than expected, but thankfully, I'm fully fit again," he said. "I'm 100% ready and motivated for the World Cup on home soil."



Marcos LLORENTE
(Spain)

Under long-serving Atletico Madrid head coach Diego Simeone, Llorente has turned himself into an international-class utility man, equally impressive at right-back as in holding midfield. Spain boss Luis de la Fuente calls the 31-year-old a "complete footballer".

Johan MANZAMBI
(Switzerland)

The Freiburg midfielder's first taste of international football in June 2025 was a roaring success, playing a starring role in Switzerland's 4-0 demolition of the United States. He will return to the US this summer as an established first-teamer, looking to display the same directness and unpredictability.

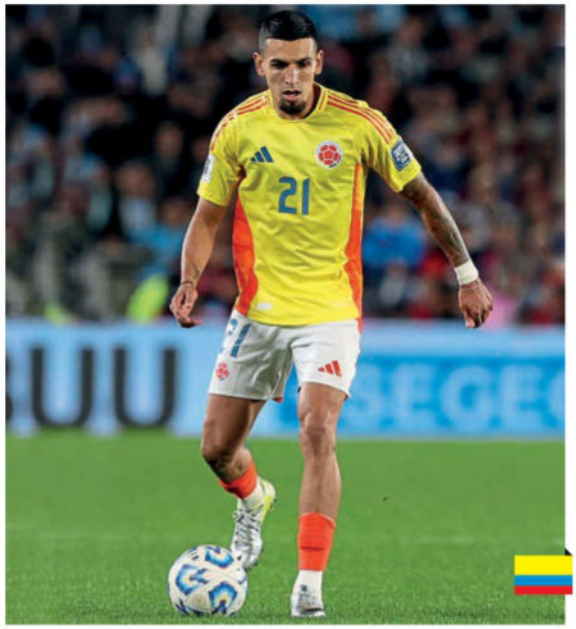
Daniel MUNOZ
(Colombia)

The Crystal Palace speed machine, widely regarded as one of the best right-backs in the Premier League, has come a long way since a disastrous debut for Colombia in 2021, sent off just one minute after appearing as a second-half substitute in a World Cup qualifier in Peru.

Guilty of nothing more than attempting to deliver a cross with a defender closing in on him, Munoz could claim to have been harshly treated. Three years later he would be on the receiving end of another red card, this time in the Copa America semi-final against Uruguay. But despite all this, the national team good times have far outweighed the bad. In his 40-odd caps he has more than played his part in two Copa America podium spots (third in 2021 and runners-up in 2024), and as one of Colombia's untouchables will have a starring role at the World Cup.

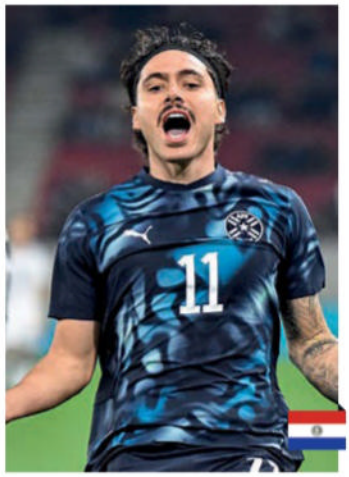
He is sure to be full of intensity and attacking desire in Group K, where the Colombians will face Portugal, DR Congo and Uzbekistan in close-to-home venues in Mexico and Florida. Just the sort of rocking atmosphere the heart-on-his-sleeve Munoz will relish. Known as the "*Hincha en la Cancha*" (The Fan on the Field) during his time at Atletico Nacional in Medellin, the 30-year-old will run through brick walls for his colours, and that sort of infectious commitment to the cause is a major asset for *Los Cafeteros*.

Rumoured to be on the radar of some of Europe's biggest clubs, many eyes will be on how Munoz performs individually at this summer finals, but nothing is more important to him than the collective success of his nation. Note the abundant optimism: "We're a golden generation. We're travelling with a clear objective: to win the World Cup."



Omar MARMOUSH
(Egypt)

About to enjoy his first-ever World Cup, the Manchester City forward has taken just five years to approach the landmark of 50 caps for his country. Only a back-up at City, whom he joined from Eintracht Frankfurt in January 2025, he may well be auditioning for a summer move.



MAURICIO
(Paraguay)

Accomplished Brazilian-born ace, whose Paraguayan grandmother recently enabled a change of international allegiance. Mauricio made his debut off the bench in March, with Paraguay coach Gustavo Alfaro hoping the Palmeiras schemer can be the engine-room organiser his team badly needs.

Moussa NIAKHATE
(Senegal)

Solid as a rock this term for both his club, Lyon, and his country, it is hard to believe that the giant 30-year-old centre-back was a figure of derision not so long ago, perilously close to losing his place in the starting line-up.

Throughout the 2024-25 campaign, his first with Lyon following a €30m move from Nottingham Forest, he looked anything but convincing, mistake-ridden and clearly lacking in confidence. Fast forward to this season and what a sea change has occurred, Niakhate regularly earning rave reviews for his muscular, commanding presence, strength in the air and good use of the ball. It was as if someone had suddenly flicked a switch, bringing back the player who was so impressive during a four-year spell in the Bundesliga with Mainz from 2018, a period in which he served as captain.

In addition to his outstanding work for OL these past few months, he also starred for Senegal at the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations finals, a key component in their title-winning efforts – later nullified by their controversial walk-off in the final against Morocco – and deservedly voted onto the Team of the Tournament.

Born and raised in Roubaix in northern France, he played for Valenciennes and Metz in Ligue 1 and was good enough too to represent France at Under-19, Under-20 and Under-21 levels. In 2023, he decided on a change of football nationality, pledging himself to Senegal, the country of his parents.

"Mine was a choice of the heart. For as long as I can remember, I've been in a Senegalese atmosphere," Niakhate said. "There are no words to express my feelings about representing Senegal. When my father died, I made a promise to myself that if I turned pro, I would play for Senegal."

Michael OLISE
(France)

Make no mistake about it, if Olise can bring his stellar work for Bayern Munich – some 40 goals and over 50 assists in two seasons – to his first-ever major international tournament, he could easily emerge as the top jury pick in the race for the 2026 Ballon d'Or.

Born and raised in London but qualified for *Les Bleus* thanks to a Franco-Algerian mother, Olise is allergic to the media spotlight, decidedly ill at ease in the presence of cameras and microphones. But what this most reserved of characters lacks in PR skills he more than compensates for with his talent, his exceptional ability to dribble at speed, his incisiveness when cutting inside onto his favoured left foot, his ever-accurate crosses and passes, his sharp, intelligent movement off the ball and dead-eye finishing. In their extra-terrestrial attacking line of Olise, Kylian Mbappe, Ousmane Dembele and either Bradley Barcola or Desire Doue, France boast the ultimate of trump cards.

Inevitably, rumours of a possible departure from the Allianz Arena have become common currency of late, with the likes of Manchester City, Liverpool and Real Madrid all reported to have him on their watch-lists. Eye-watering bids of €200m are currently circulating. But will Bayern, who bought him from Crystal Palace for just €60m, play ball? They have him under contract until 2029 and will be looking to dig deep for an extension.

In addition to his remarkable talent, Olise has proved himself a physical beast for Bayern. In contrast to his final season at Crystal Palace – when a hamstring problem limited him to only 19 Premier League games – he tends to start every week in Germany, and with no ill-effects.

Mbekezeli MBOKAZI
(South Africa)

Bafana Bafana have a gem in the 20-year-old Chicago Fire centre-back, an individual of immense power and sound judgement. According to South Africa coach Hugo Broos, the youngster, previously with Orlando Pirates, should have moved to Europe rather than MLS.

Eloy ROOM
(Curacao)

The veteran keeper is Curacao's joint most-capped player of all-time, tied with Leandro Bacuna. From Nijmegen in the Netherlands, the ex-PSV shot-stopper has been a trailblazer, with a whole host of other Dutch-born players following him since his switch of allegiance in 2015.

PEDRI
(Spain)

This tournament should be one of redemption for the brilliant Barcelona midfielder, who missed out on Spain's coronation at Euro 2024 after badly spraining his knee early in *La Roja's* semi-final victory over Germany, the consequence of an over-zealous challenge from Toni Kroos.

Already established as one of the most accomplished players in the world today and the heir apparent to Barca and Spain playmaking legend Andres Iniesta, the 23-year-old Pedri now has to live with all the pressure that that tag entails. Just as well that he's as level-headed as he is talented. As he has constantly proven at Barca over the last half-dozen seasons, he's definitely not someone to be carried away by the tidal wave of hype. He hails from a modest family in the Canary Islands and this down-to-earth mentality shines though in every match he plays.

"Pedri is special, he's a great player," opined Barcelona head coach Hansi Flick earlier this season. "He's even improving as a leader. He's extremely important. He's everywhere on the pitch. He defends, he wins the ball back, he's unbelievable with the ball. He's crucial for us."

The Spanish football nation, still traumatised by their shock penalty-shootout loss to Morocco in the last-16 stage of the 2022 World Cup, will be banking on the sort of inspiration that Pedri brings as standard: his unique balance, agility and poise on the ball, his flair for linking the play, progressive passing and high energy. It will be interesting to see how he adapts his game to the heat and humidity of the Americas. In La Liga this past season, he has left everyone else for dead in the running statistics, racking up some 330km by the end of April, an incredible average of 13km per match.

Noah SADIKI
(DR Congo)

Since joining Sunderland from Belgian side Union SG last summer, the Brussels-born Sadiki has looked every inch the reincarnation of ex-Leicester City, Chelsea and France midfield livewire N'Golo Kante, full of running, surgical in his interceptions and recovery tackles, and a precision passer.

Eldor SHOMURODOV
(Uzbekistan)

Uzbekistan's emblematic centre-forward and captain will not be short of confidence as the team from Central Asia compete in their first World Cup, buoyed by a hatful of goals this term for Istanbul Basaksehir. The country's all-time top scorer with 44 goals in 90 games, including five in qualification.

DANILO SANTOS
(Brazil)

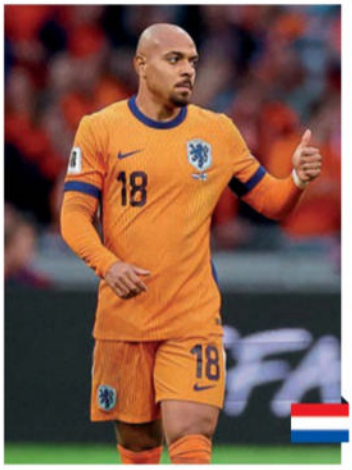
Brazil head coach Carlo Ancelotti has unquestionably fortified the *Selecao* ranks with the recent addition to the squad of the all-singing, all-dancing Botafogo midfielder. The 25-year-old was rewarded for an exceptional turn of form in the early stages of the 2026 Brazilian top flight, which included a goalscoring hot streak of seven in ten games, with a call-up for two March friendlies in the United States.

After coming off the bench to win his first cap against France in Boston – a very impressive 20-minute cameo at the heart of the engine room – he was deservedly promoted to the starting line-up for the Croatia fixture in Orlando, once again catching the eye with a triple-A performance as the midfield pivot. Not content with a ravenous appetite for interceptions and tackles, he displayed an excellent range of pass, broke forward with real menace and even managed to open the scoring, latching onto a Vinicius Junior pull-back to side foot emphatically home.

With the defensive midfield unit not one of Brazil's strongest, Danilo might just be the man to add some much-needed zest alongside the stability provided by Casemiro. Former Brazil striker Walter Casagrande, now a respected pundit, believes Danilo would be better suited to Ancelotti's plans than current first-choice pivot, Newcastle United's Bruno Guimaraes: "I think Bruno is going to have strong competition from Danilo. He's a player who absolutely gets involved in the game. He's non-stop. He'll shoot from outside the box, breaks well into the danger zone and can score. I see him as more intense than Bruno Guimaraes."

There is a chance, of course, all three could start in midfield, with the heat and humidity in North America dictating the need for more legs and energy in the middle of the park.

Twice a Copa Libertadores winner with Sao Paulo outfit Palmeiras (in 2020 and 2021), Danilo spent two and a half years with Nottingham Forest between 2023 and 2025, but a serious knee injury derailed his progress in England.



Donyell MALEN
(Netherlands)

The dynamic Dutch forward joined Roma from Aston Villa in mid-January, yet remarkably finished joint-second in the Serie A scoring charts with 14 goals. Set to start on the wing with Xavi Simons injured, Malen will be hoping to carry that prolific form into the World Cup.

Marko STAMENIC
(New Zealand)

The All Whites midfielder is two or three players in one, offering excellent distribution, dribbling ability, goals and athleticism. Born in Wellington to a Serbian father and Samoan mother, he moved from Nottingham Forest to Championship side Swansea City in 2025.

Deniz UNDAV
(Germany)

Over or Undav? Leader of the line or second-half joker? The World Cup fate of the cunning and single-minded Stuttgart striker remains a hot topic that sharply divides the German football public – both fans and pundits alike.

For one group, let's call them the traditionalists, it makes perfect sense for the most prolific German goalscorer in this season's Bundesliga with 19 strikes – a tally only bettered by Bayern Munich's Harry Kane – to start for the *Nationalmannschaft*. In contrast to other contenders for the role Undav is a genuine centre-forward and is in far better form, with Arsenal's Kai Havertz still ring-rusty after a long injury lay-off, Borussia Dortmund's Maximilian Beier failing to reach double figures for league goals in 2025-26, and Nick Woltemade hardly ripping up trees at Newcastle United since joining the Magpies last summer – often being utilised in midfield instead.

More progressive football thinkers, however, see Undav in a totally different light, as someone who needs others to load the gun for him and only makes a minimal all-round contribution. *Bundestrainer* Julian Nagelsmann wants his front four to constantly switch positions, and that type of attacking carousel is hardly made to measure for Undaz. Instead, Nagelsmann would prefer to deploy the 29-year-old as his supersub, bringing him on as defenders tire and the game is more stretched.

After coming off the bench to net the winner in a 2-1 friendly win over Ghana – fittingly held on familiar turf in Stuttgart – Undav probably would have expected a bouquet of praise from his coach. But instead received an arrangement of Nagelsmann thorns: "He did what he often does for Stuttgart. He wasn't very involved. I don't think he was at all up to that point. Then he was decisive and scored. He did what a goalscorer has to do." A day later, Nagelsmann rang Undav to apologise. "It was an unnecessary comment, and in the way it was phrased was far too blunt for the public," conceded the *Bundestrainer*.

Pavel SULC
(Czech Republic)

The current Czech Footballer of the Year is absolutely essential to the national team's creativity, and is a player of "extraordinary quality," according to Czech Republic head coach Miroslav Koubek.

Known in his homeland as an attacking midfielder or wide-man, where he is usually deployed when turning out for the *Repre*, the talented 25-year-old has discovered an exciting new role since moving to Lyon last summer from Viktoria Plzen, showing a remarkable aptitude for centre-forward marksmanship. It is an almost accidental switch, which could pay big dividends for the Czechs given they lack real depth in the position outside of star striker Patrik Schick.

VITINHA
(Portugal)

After claiming third place in the Ballon d'Or polling last year, the outstanding Paris Saint-Germain midfield metronome may do better still in 2026 if he and Portugal go deep in North America.

Probably the best deep-lying playmaker on the planet at the moment, the 26-year-old former Wolverhampton Wanderers and Porto dynamo is nothing less than a modern-day maestro, and what a redoubtable opponent Portugal will be at the World Cup should he and his fellow midfielders – PSG team-mate Joao Neves and Premier League stars Bernardo Silva and Bruno Fernandes – combine to lay down the law. Portugal boss Roberto Martinez calls him "the maestro of European football," while PSG coach Luis Enrique is similarly effusive in his praise: "He is unique. In possession he is vital for us in the pivot role. He manages the ball perfectly.

He does not lose it and brings a lot to the team. He's strong physically and mentally and plays a difficult and complicated role in our team. He embodies the perfect midfielder."

Nimble, intelligent and hyperactive, he is the type of player who makes everyone around him better, the man who keeps the team machinery humming. Without his ability to set the tempo, cute distribution and ball-carrying ability, neither Portugal nor PSG would pack such a punch.

Instrumental in Portugal's UEFA Nations League triumph in 2025, he is cautiously optimistic: "I think we are one of the contenders, but I won't put us favourites. We have to keep our feet on the ground. We want to win this World Cup not just because it's everybody's dream, but to honour the memory of our late friend and team-mate Diogo Jota." A noble cause indeed. Never write off Vitinha. Only four years ago, during a loan spell at Wolves, he was mainly an afterthought.

Daniel SVENSSON
(Sweden)

A large proportion of Borussia Dortmund insiders believe the dynamic and energetic left full-back or wing-back is the club's best value signing in recent years, picked up for just €6.5m from Danish side Nordsjaelland in 2025 and now valued at closer to €40m. He won the Dortmund fans over with his relentless

running up and down the flank – the next question is can he do the same for Sweden?

National team head coach Graham Potter opted for Gabriel Gudmundsson at left wing-back for the play-offs against Ukraine and Poland, so Svensson's first task will be to impress enough in training and the World Cup warm-up matches to push himself to the top of the pecking order. A tough task, but the 24-year-old has been praised for his brilliant attitude at Dortmund, and it would come as no susprise if he batters down the door and gives Potter real food for thought.

Ayase UEDA
(Japan)

Goal-hungry striker, far and away the most clinical finisher in the Eredivisie this season for Feyenoord to claim the Golden Boot. Joined the Rotterdammers three years ago for €8m from Cercle Brugge and is now worth much, much more. His club coach Robin van Persie particularly appreciates his "strong mentality".

John YEBOAH
(Ecuador)

Born in Hamburg to a Ghanaian father and Ecuadorian mother, this clever, effervescent right-winger or second striker should be full of confidence after helping Italian side Venezia win promotion to Serie A. All Group E eyes will be on him when he takes on Germany, for whom he won 30 youth caps before switching allegiance to Ecuador.

Luka VUSKOVIC
(Croatia)

A clash with England in Group L's opening fixture will be a match of tremendous significance for Vuskovic. After a hugely successful loan spell in the Bundesliga with Hamburg this past season, the teenage centre-back is scheduled to return to Tottenham Hotspur and has the ideal opportunity to show an English audience what he can do ahead of a first Premier League campaign in 2026-27, which Spurs secured by avoiding relegation on the last day of the season.

The towering Vuskovic, who Spurs acquired from Hajduk Split in the summer of 2025 on a five-year deal, has yet to play for the North Londoners. But thanks to great work with Hamburg, he already has an army of admirers in Germany – including the top brass at Bayern Munich. A captivating mixture of aerial power, uncompromising physicality and ability on the ball, he has rare presence and composure for a 19-year-old and has a knack of

getting on the scoresheet.

"Luka is a machine," gushes veteran Croatian attacker Andrej Kramaric, who has come up against him while starring for Hoffenheim. "He has a great career in front of him." Hamburg director of sport Claus Costa agrees: "Week in and week out, he has played to the highest of standards. His consistency has been so impressive. He's been an absolute win for the team and the club."

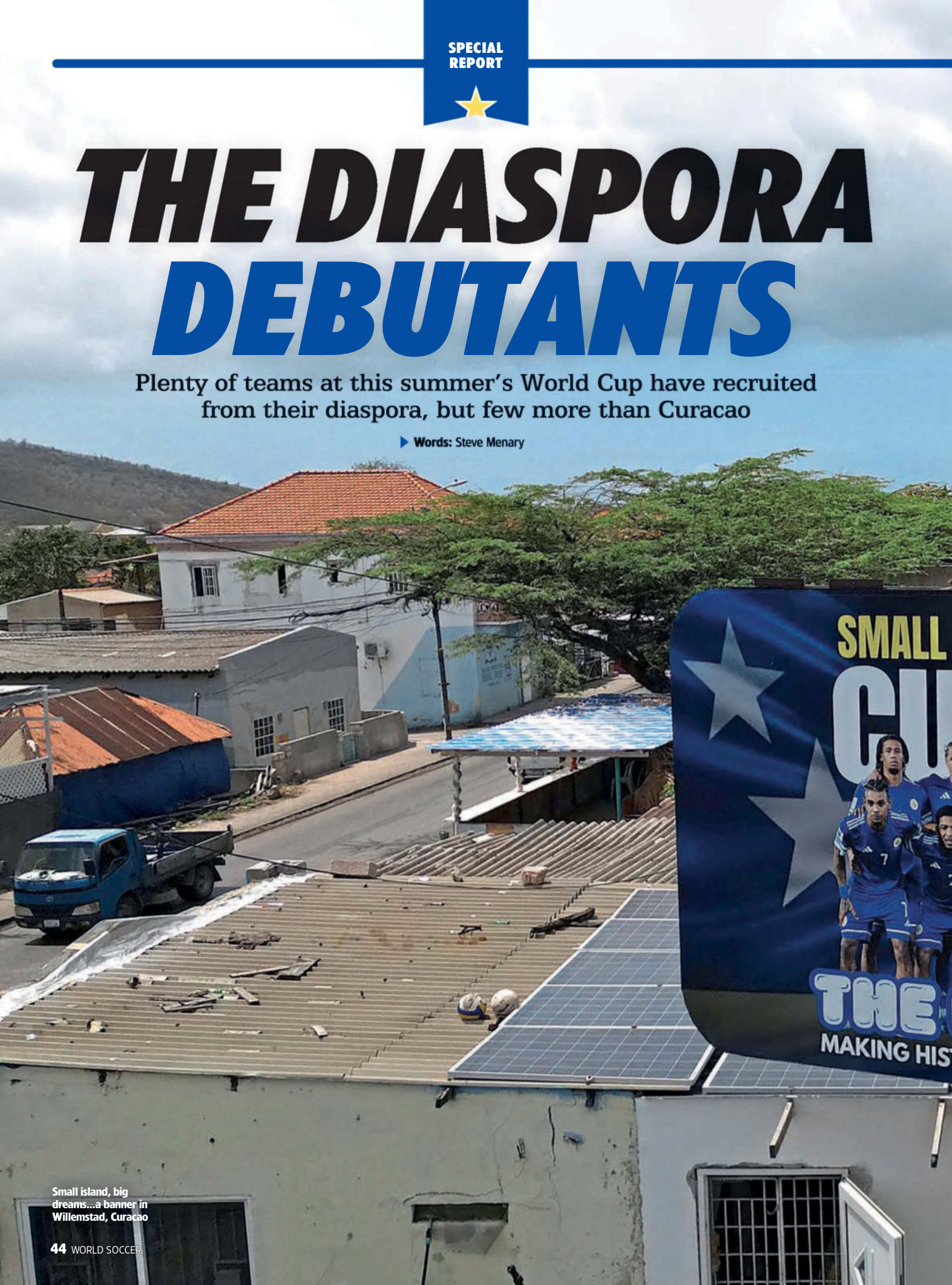
Vuskovic always has been a young gun in a hurry, one of the most scouted youngsters in all of Europe at the age of 15, barely 16 when making his pro debut for Hajduk and only 18 on the day of his full international debut in a World Cup qualifier against the Faroe Islands last November.

His meteoric rise has also been reflected in Croatia coach Zlatko Dalic having to re-think his formation for the World Cup. Having deployed a 4-2-3-1 for the majority of qualifying, the one time Dalic did experiment with a back three was to accomodate the blossoming Vuskovic at the heart of the defence. Given the youngster's undeniable form, Dalic adopted the system again in both March friendlies and that now looks to be his go-to formation.

THE DIASPORA DEBUTANTS

Plenty of teams at this summer's World Cup have recruited from their diaspora, but few more than Curacao

Words: Steve Menary



Small island, big dreams...a banner in Willemstad, Curacao

The world is getting smaller, as this summer's World Cup will demonstrate. Across the tournament, dozens of players will represent the countries of their parents or grandparents, all of them a walking, talking example of globalisation, post-colonialism and a modern world shaped by immigration.

To an extent, this has always been a feature of international football, but never to the level that we will see this summer.

In part, it is a legacy of the 2020 FIFA congress, when international eligibility rules were updated. Since then, players have been allowed to switch national teams even if they have already won a competitive cap (no more than three before the age of 21), ending the practice of countries handing debuts to promising young players of mixed heritage purely to lock them down.

There has been a cultural shift, too, a greater understanding that national identity is not straightforward, that players can feel proud to represent a country even if they have won caps for another.

On top of that, the growing use of data and technology means that federations have a greater ability to identify eligible players than ever before.

Few countries have benefitted more from this evolution than Curacao. Back in November, they secured a 0-0 draw with Jamaica in Kingston to qualify for their first-ever World Cup finals, with a team comprised entirely of Dutch-born players. With a population of around 150,000 on the island, it would have been impossible for them to compete otherwise.

The Dutch Caribbean island is the smallest country to ever qualify for a World Cup, and that fact – plus head coach Dick Advocaat, who will be the oldest manager in World Cup history – dominated coverage of Curacao's achievement, but a more complex story lies behind their qualification.

The association in Curacao was founded in 1921 and joined FIFA in 1932. After World War Two, Curacao merged with the other five Dutch Caribbean islands – Aruba, Bonaire, Saba, Sint Eustatius and Sint Maarten – to form the Netherlands Antilles.

A sporting merger followed and the Dutch Antilles, benefitting from regular visits from clubs like Feyenoord, and return trips back to Europe, became one of the region's top sides.

After going nearly two years unbeaten in the early 1960s, the Antilles finished

third at the CONCACAF Championship (the predecessor to the modern-day Gold Cup) in 1963 and 1969.

By the time the Netherlands Antilles was disbanded in 2010 and the Federashon Futbol Korsou (FFK) took over the FIFA ranking, Curacao had long fallen from those heights, but a search had already begun among the island's diaspora that would eventually take the island on an incredible journey to this summer's World Cup finals.

After moving to Europe for his education, Etienne Siliee returned home to Curacao in the 1980s to work as a sports teacher. By 2003, he was the FFK's technical director. "When I returned back and I started my career as assistant national coach, all the players were local," recalls Siliee. "We were amateur in organisation, in structure, in working as volunteers, in administration and on the field. The lack of resources was a big threat."

In 2004, experienced Dutch coach Pim Verbeek took charge of the Antilles, and a search began for eligible players in the European-based diaspora. The number of people of Curacaoan origin in the Netherlands is only marginally smaller than in the Caribbean; in Rotterdam alone, there are an estimated 23,000 people with Curacaoan roots.

Looking to Europe for players not only doubled the potential playing pool, it also increased the level. The ten-team Prome Divishon on the island is only amateur and the standard had long fallen behind Curacao's peers compared to the heady days of 1979, when then-Curacaoan champions Jong Colombia reached the CONCACAF Champions Cup final.

Under Verbeek and his assistant Henk Duut, the FFK wanted to qualify for the 2006 World Cup in Germany, but a second-round 6-1 aggregate thrashing from Honduras put paid to that plan.

Another Dutchman soon arrived in Leen Looijen. His assistant was Remko Bicentini, the son of Moises Bicentini, one of the first Curacaoans in Dutch professional football, who played for NEC Nijmegen in the 1950s.

The diaspora debutants...none of the starting XI in Curacao's clash with Jamaica were born on the island

Key figure...Remko Bicentini led Curacao to Caribbean Cup glory in 2017

"The level wasn't that high back then," says Bicentini. "Let me put it this way: back then, the national team consisted mainly of amateur players. Robin Nelisse from FC Utrecht, Tyrone Loran at NAC, and Orlando Smeekes from Go Ahead Eagles were the only professionals."

A turning point came in 2010 when the Antilles was dissolved politically and Curacao took over the Antilles' FIFA membership.

Siliee adds: "That period started the whole professional approach in recruiting players from the diaspora generation in the Netherlands. From 2010, we started to recruit players from the professional teams and they were involved in the Under-17 team, the Under-20 team and the senior team."

When Curacao qualified for the 2013 CONCACAF Under-20 Championship, experienced Dutch coach Hans Jan Schrijver was brought in to lead the side at the finals in Mexico. Around 40% of the squad from Curacao was retained and bolstered by players from the European diaspora, which brought in players who would become a driving force behind the recent successes: Cuco Martina, Roly Bonevacia and Leandro Bacuna.

Recruiting from Europe remained hard. Bicentini adds: "Even ten years ago, when I sat down with clubs to discuss players, they would sometimes ask if we played 11-a-side in Curacao. I followed every player, both domestically and internationally, who could potentially play for Curacao, and did so, week after week. I did this from the very beginning in 2007, and it restored the players' faith, because they knew we were serious and that we wanted to make progress."

A parade of coaches took charge of the senior national side with an inevitable reliance on Europe as the Dutch association, the KNVB, has an international department and regularly helps educate coaches and players. In 2015, Dutch legend Patrick Kluivert, whose mother was born on the island, was brought in as national team coach.

Captain...Leandro Bacuna has played for Curacao since 2016

Kluivert brought kudos and respect, but Curacao were knocked out of the 2018 World Cup qualifiers in the third round and Kluivert left for the Ajax youth team.

Bicentini took over again and had a memorable impact. Kluivert had still been involved for the Caribbean Cup qualifiers but at the 2017 finals in Martinique, Bicentini was in charge. Curacao beat the hosts in the semi-finals before two goals from Elson Hooi secured victory over Jamaica.

Bicentini adds: "Before I took over from Patrick Kluivert, I had already worked with three national coaches as an assistant coach. Looking back, that was a huge advantage. I see these ten years as a valuable learning experience from which I've reaped the benefits every day. I've experienced just about everything."

If the dissolution of the Antilles was one turning point, the Caribbean Cup win was an even bigger one. Winning it in 2017 took Curacao to their first CONCACAF Gold Cup. There, Curacao lost all three games but they returned again in 2019 under Bicentini and reached the quarter-finals. Players in Europe took notice and that impact has been long-lasting.

> "There's also a change in mindset. It's no longer the case that good players only want to play for the Netherlands"
> **Former Curacao head coach Remko Bicentini**

Bicentini adds: "Thanks to our successes, players also started offering themselves. The level naturally became more appealing to them, as it could also serve as a springboard for their own individual careers at their club.

"When I started in 2008, Curacao had three paid players in the national team; in 2014, there were six. Nowadays, Curacao can count on 50 professionals who want to defend its honour. In that respect, there's also a change in mindset. It's no longer the case that good players only want to play for the Netherlands."

Bicentini was fired in 2020 amidst political manoeuvring at the FFK and Guus Hiddink was brought in. The veteran Dutch coach only lasted a year and Bicentini returned once more before Dick Advocaat took over in 2024, further upgrading Curacao's status.

The veteran Dutchman was in charge for last year's Gold Cup, as Curacao held Canada and El Salvador to draws and were only knocked out in stoppage time of the final game against Honduras, and then led them to World Cup qualification. In February he was forced to step down due to family circumstances, with fellow Dutchman Fred Rutten stepping in to replace him, but remarkably, with the FFK under pressure to reinstate him, Advocaat returned in May just weeks before the World Cup kicked off following Rutten's resignation.

The current squad still has some of the players recruited by Bicentini for the Caribbean Cup nine years ago, such as goalkeeper Eloy Room, defender Jurien Gaari, and the Bacuna brothers Leandro and Juninho. Another member of that side, Rotterdam-born striker Rangelo Janga, narrowly missed the cut for the World Cup, but as Curacao's all-time top scorer his impact has been just as key. For those that did make the squad, it will be a fitting finale to their careers.

With a generation of younger players also coming through, this World Cup appearance will only attract more talent. When Curacao's campaign kicks off in Houston on June 14 against four-time champions Germany, it will be the result of two decades of work to bring the Curacaoan diaspora back home and restore the island to its former glories.

Face to face:
Eloy Room

"It's like dominoes – I was one of the first"

Curacao's goalkeeper switched his international allegiance from the Netherlands in 2015. Eleven years on, he is set to represent the island at the World Cup

What's your family connection to Curacao?
My father was born in Curacao so his family is from there. My mother is Dutch, but she also lived in Curacao for a couple of years. We went there on vacation a lot and we still have family there so there was a really big connection with the island. I was born and grew up in Holland, but I went to the Caribbean a lot, so I also grew up with Curacao.

With strong links to both countries, have your loyalties always been split?
When you're younger, you don't really think about it. I wanted to play for Holland, but I knew that I could also play for Curacao because we have the same passport. I played for Holland's youth teams – from the Under-16s to the Under-20s. When I made the decision to play for Curacao's senior team in an official game, I couldn't change anymore. It wasn't an easy decision because my goal was always to play for Holland, and there was still some interest in me, but then Curacao came on the radar. I always dreamed of giving something back to the island.

How were you first approached about representing Curacao?
Patrick Kluivert was the head coach. If you see him calling, then you pick up the phone! It was a good conversation. He told me: "I need players like you to choose Curacao so that others will too." It's like dominoes – I was one of the first. Kluivert had a lot of local players from Curacao and the level there isn't very high, so the national team was always struggling. He said: "It's going to be a long road, but I believe we can reach the World Cup." That was my goal and 11 years later we made it. I believed in the project. I chose Curacao and never looked back.

In 2017, Curacao qualified for the Gold Cup for the first time and then reached the quarter-finals two years later. How do you reflect on those tournaments?
We'd never qualified for a major tournament before. You can almost compare it to qualifying for the World Cup – that was a turning point for the national team. It was really special, a proud moment for me and for the country. We also wanted to perform. If you reach a certain level, you want to stay there. We set the bar and kept building from there.

Dick Advocaat was appointed by Curacao in 2024 and returned again just before the World Cup. What's he like to play for?
He's really direct in his approach. If it's good, it's good. If it's bad, it's bad. If he doesn't like something, he just tells you straight. I like that and I think we needed that to help us get to the next level. He's coached some of the biggest clubs and the biggest countries. He's already been to the World Cup, so he knows what we have to do. He's really calm and he doesn't panic during games. Even at his age, he's really involved in training. It's nice to see that he still has so much drive in him to help us.

You qualified for the World Cup after a 0-0 draw with Jamaica. Talk us through the match from your perspective...
It was really difficult and intense. Playing away, we knew it was going to be hard, but we were really confident and calm. Before the game, the coach [Advocaat] had to suddenly leave the team and go back to Holland because of family issues, so that was a big blow. But we knew what the mission was and we told the coach we were going to do it for him. That gave us extra motivation. I knew the pressure was more on them. We'd already got a result against them at home. It was a crazy game. They had a big chance straightaway – a one-v-one – and I saved it, so that gave us a huge confidence boost. We also had some luck – the ball hit the post and the bar – but, at the end of the day, we defended really well. We knew that a point was enough.

How did you feel at full-time, knowing that you'd made history?
Unbelievable. It's still unreal that we actually made it after such a long road. After the game, you don't even realise what you've done. All the emotions came back, from when I started playing for Curacao until the end. It was really emotional. I started 11 years ago, and, in the beginning, people thought we were never going to make it. I always had the belief.

What did you think when Curacao were drawn in Group E, alongside Germany, Ecuador and Ivory Coast?
I didn't really care who we played, but of course you want some nice match-ups. Germany is going to be a big game as our opener. The other games are difficult too, but they all will be at a World Cup. There are chances to surprise some teams and get some points. Now that we've made it to the World

Cup, we want to show that we belong there. That's another motivation for us to really fight. We want to show the world that we're not only there to participate; we also want to get results.

As the smallest country to ever qualify for the World Cup, what are your hopes and expectations going into the tournament?
It's difficult because we've never really played against such big countries. But on the other hand, we have nothing to lose so the pressure shifts more to the other teams. I think we have a good mix of qualities. We have a lot of young players mixed with experienced ones, so I think we can get some good results. It's going to be difficult, but we don't concede a lot of goals, and we have a lot of variation and speed up front so maybe we can play on the counter. Let's see. I'm confident that we can get some results.

Long term, what impact do you think competing at the World Cup could have on the future of football in Curacao?
A lot of young players automatically choose Holland, but I think more are going to choose Curacao. That's going to be huge for the future of the national team. There's also the exposure that Curacao's getting. A lot of talents now get the chance to go abroad and play in other countries, so I think that's going to help with the development of young players. All eyes are now on Curacao and that can only help with the development of football on the island. Financially, it's going to be a huge step forward and the boost we needed.

You've been part of the Curacao squad since 2015. What's the biggest change you've noticed during that time?
I think the professionalism. When I started, financially it was difficult, so the flights and hotels sometimes weren't good. We had some trips where flights were cancelled and we had to stay in the airport for two days, which wasn't ideal preparation. Now that we've reached a certain level, and have a head coach like Dick Advocaat, everything is organised off the pitch. We don't have to worry about that stuff; we can really focus on the game. I think that's the most important thing that's changed.

Interview by Sean Cole

GRAHAM ARNOLD

"The World Cup gives an opportunity to change the perception of the country"

As he prepares for his second World Cup as a manager, Iraq's Australian head coach discusses his team's chances this summer and reflects on his career

You stepped down as Australia coach in September 2024, and took over Iraq the following May. What attracted you to the new position?
I was the interim coach of Australia when we lost [3-1] to them in the [2007] Asian Cup. They went on to become champions. I was very impressed with them. I believed they would kick on and qualify for a future World Cup, but they never did and that surprised me.

Fast-forward 18 years and I was given the chance to take Iraq to a World Cup for the first time since 1986. It was a challenge I couldn't refuse. I resigned from Australia [in September 2024] because I had taken them as far as I could.

Andy Roxburgh [former Scotland manager and current technical director for the Asian Football Confederation] told me it was one of the toughest jobs in world football. I needed to hear that to reignite my passion.

It must have been a step out of your comfort zone, given that all of your previous head coaching experience had been in Australia? How have you immersed yourself in Iraqi football since your appointment?
I spent eight months living in Baghdad. I could've flown over a few weeks before a match and left pretty much after the final whistle, but I wanted to show the Iraqi people that I was all in, 100% committed to the cause.

They have a 20-team top division, and I wanted to see the quality and infrastructure for myself. I wanted to work with the Iraqi Football Association in person rather than online. It was also important to understand the mentality of the people, and the best way to do that is by immersing yourself into their culture.

Your inter-confederation play-off against Bolivia almost had to be rearranged after the Iran war broke out. How concerned were you by the travel disruption?
I had initially travelled to Dubai to monitor a few of the players, and then it was supposed to be onwards to Baghdad, as the [Iraqi] prime minister had chartered a flight for the entire team to fly to Monterrey. I heard the first bomb the Israelis dropped on Iran from my hotel room. I managed to get out after ten days, but Iraqi airspace was closed.

I called for the match to be postponed because we needed our full-strength team for a game of this magnitude. FIFA were sympathetic but said postponement was a non-starter. They would assist in any way they could to get the Iraq-based players out of the country. The solution was a 20-hour coach trip to the Jordanian border, a stay of 24 hours in Jordan till their airspace opened, and then a 20-hour flight to Mexico via Lisbon. The rest of their team-mates had flown in from various European countries. It wasn't ideal but you have to deal with the situation you find yourself in.

It was during this time I had to be a father figure, especially to the younger players. I had to impose a social media ban. I told them that they couldn't control events happening in the Middle East. There was little point constantly being on their phones. They also had to trust their families to get in touch, if they needed to. I reinforced that we were on the verge of making the entire nation proud, and 100% of our focus and energy had to be on Bolivia.

What does it mean for Iraq to qualify for the World Cup?
The word "fanatical" doesn't do justice to describe Iraqi football supporters. The entire country comes to a standstill when the team

is playing. The last two to three decades have been very difficult for the people due to war and conflict. The World Cup is a truly global event, which gives an opportunity to change the perception of the country.

I have first-hand experience of the impact qualifying for a World Cup has on a nation. I was Guus Hiddink's assistant when Australia qualified for the first time in 32 years for Germany [2006]. You're inspiring the next generation, the government shows more interest in the sport and there is greater finance in place to invest in coaching, stadia and training facilities.

In Australia, football is competing against cricket, rugby and Aussie Rules to name a few. In Iraq, it's the number one sport. Being on such a high, this is the perfect time to continue investing at all levels of the game, so it doesn't take 40 years to reach another tournament.

The Iraq squad is split between home-based players and those from the diaspora. Have you experienced any issues in integrating the team?
When I first took the job, I noticed that the two sets of players sat at different tables during meals. I got rid of the smaller tables and brought in one large one. I was also conscious that the very first drill we did at training involved everyone, as a way of breaking the ice.

The homegrown players are extremely proud of their country. What you notice about the diaspora is they have an added edge of making their parents proud, who had left Iraq to set up new lives in Scandinavia or the UK. It helps that the diaspora players have a good grasp of Arabic.

You hired one of your former Sydney FC players, ex-Iraq international Ali Abba, as an interpreter. How important has he been?
In a previous role I was assigned an interpreter, who came from a non-footballing background. He didn't have the passion for the game. He didn't speak the language of football. With Ali, it's completely different. The current players are familiar with him. They understand he can relate to them because he's put on the national shirt. Also, from our previous time together he knows the level of commitment and professionalism I demand. When he's translating, I'm confident it's accurate and coming from the heart. He was one of the first people I reached out to when I was offered the job, and he encouraged me to take it.

On a personal level, what does the future hold for Graham Arnold?
Guus is my mentor and to this day I call him and ask for his advice. He's taken three teams to a World Cup, and I've told him I want to beat his record. There are several teams in Asia who have not qualified for a long time. So why not make it three or four? I could also stay on with Iraq. I'm 62, fit and healthy. I'm leaving all options on the table.

Interview by Imran Azam

SERGEJ BARBAREZ

"This is only the beginning of a serious project"

After leading Bosnia & Herzegovina to World Cup qualification – making an instant impact in his first coaching role – the former Bundesliga forward discusses his nation's impressive progress, this summer's tournament, and what the future might hold

After taking charge of the Bosnia & Herzegovina national team in April 2024, you said that the UEFA Nations League games and World Cup qualifiers should serve as a process to help build a new team, with the ultimate goal to qualify for Euro 2028. How did you manage to exceed that plan and qualify for this summer's World Cup?
When I took over the national team, I was aware that a hard and long process was in front of us. I didn't want to give unrealistic promises; I didn't want to say what people liked to hear. I considered that Euro 2028 was a realistic goal for a new generation, which we have started to build. However, through work, energy and character of the team, one could see that we were maturing faster than expected. From the first day the players embraced the idea of togetherness, discipline and identity that we wanted to have. Alongside that, the atmosphere around the national team has completely changed and that gave us additional strength. Qualifying for the World Cup did not come by chance, but as a result of huge work from all the people in and around the national team.

The beginning, at least results-wise, was not easy. In your first eight games, you suffered six defeats and registered two draws. What went through your mind, for example, after the 7-0 UEFA Nations League defeat to Germany?
Of course, it wasn't easy. When you lose 7-0 to Germany, it's normal that you ask yourself a lot of questions. But, honestly, that defeat didn't break me. It even strengthened my conviction that we had to continue with the changes we'd started. I knew that we were building a new national team and that there would be painful moments. It would have been easy, back then, to give up the plan and return to some short-term solutions. But that's not what I wanted. I told the players back then that people would remember us for how we reacted after difficult moments, rather than only after victories. I think we showed character.

Within your vision and plan to help rejuvenate the national team, you selected more than 20 new players, most of them from the diaspora. Many of those players could have played for other national teams, yet they decided to play for the country of their parents...
Those were very serious and emotional stories, where sports director Emir Spahic did a huge job. It was not only about football, but about trust and a sense of belonging. With many players we talked for hours. Some of them grew up far away from Bosnia-Herzegovina, but in their homes they were carrying our language, culture and emotions for this country. We did not push anyone. We wanted the players to feel for themselves that they belong here. When you see today how they die for the shirt of Bosnia-Herzegovina, then you know that you did the right thing.

Many say that this team is only halfway to reaching its full potential, that it is getting ready for a big future. What do you think?
I think this team indeed has big potential. But I'm always cautious when we talk about the future. Talent alone doesn't mean anything if there is no work, discipline and continuity. We have young players who already play serious football and who are yet to reach their best years. It's most important that the team stays hungry for success and that it doesn't think that the World Cup participation is the end of the story. I believe that this is only the beginning of a serious project.

You often point out that the management team – seven former Bosnia & Herzegovina internationals – are all pulling in the same direction. Can you describe the roles and significance of your co-workers Emir Spahic, Zlatan Bajramovic, Mirko Hrgovic, Ninoslav Milenkovic, Kenan Hasagic and Sasa Papac?
This is, for me, maybe the most important part of the whole story. All of us were Bosnia-Herzegovina internationals as players, we know what it means to wear that shirt and we all share the same goal. Emir Spahic has a huge role in terms of organisation and communication with the players and in terms of creation of a serious system. All of them are top experts,

bring positive energy and deliver excellent analysis. Not only those you named, we are happy with the work of the entire staff.

You started your coaching career at the age of 52. Why didn't you begin earlier to work as coach?
Simply, the right opportunity to work as coach did not arrive earlier.

Only a few months before you were named head coach, you said in a TV interview that you had decided to move away from football, and that you considered the situation in and around the national team as very bad. How did the turnaround happen?
It is true that I was disappointed with many things in our football and I didn't hide that. At one point I really thought that my chapter with football was closed. However, talks that I had with people within our football federation, first of all with chairman Vico Zeljkovic, gave me the feeling that there was a sincere desire to change things. I felt the trust and I got the freedom, together with my co-workers, to build something new. When I saw that there was support for long-term work, of course I accepted to fulfil my dream and guide the national team of my home country. The results behind us show that the right decisions were made.

The celebrations after the dramatic penalty-shootout victory over Italy in the World Cup qualification play-offs were amazing. How did you experience those celebrations?
That was a night I will never forget. The emotions were unbelievable. To see people in Zenica crying, hugging each other and celebrating together with us, was something special. Afterwards, the welcome in Sarajevo ...it was like a huge wave of emotions that carried the entire nation. In such moments you realise how much football means to our people. Honestly, I didn't even try to hide my emotions. Such nights last a lifetime.

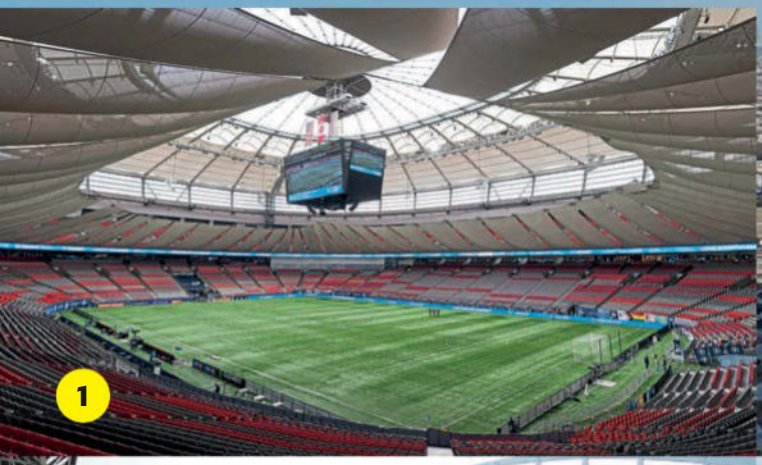
What do you think about your World Cup group-stage opponents Canada, Switzerland and Qatar? And what are the ambitions of your team?
At the World Cup there are no easy groups. Canada are a very serious national team, physically powerful and quick. Switzerland for many years have shown continuity and have experience at major tournaments. Many perhaps underestimate Qatar, but they are not at the World Cup by chance. We will respect each opponent, but we won't fear anybody. Our ambitions are to represent Bosnia-Herzegovina in the best possible way and to be competitive in each game. I believe in this team and I believe we can think about getting past the group stage. When you come to the World Cup, you don't go there just to participate.

Interview by Vladimir Novak

SPECIAL FEATURE

WORLD CUP 2026 VENUES

A guide to the host stadiums in the United States, Canada and Mexico, by James Nalton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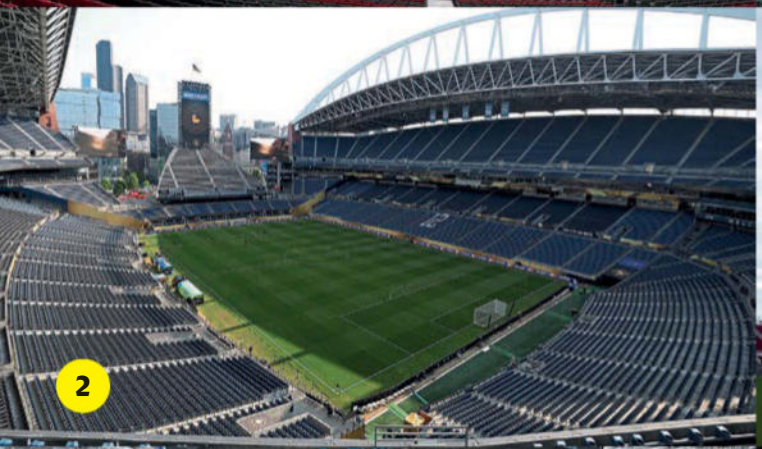
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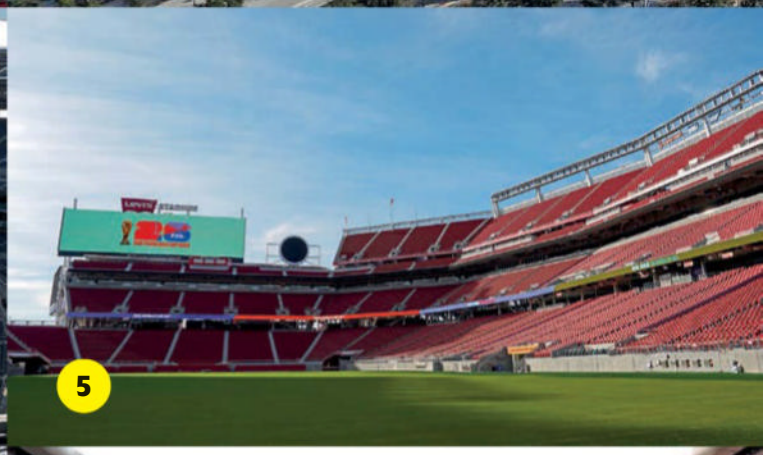
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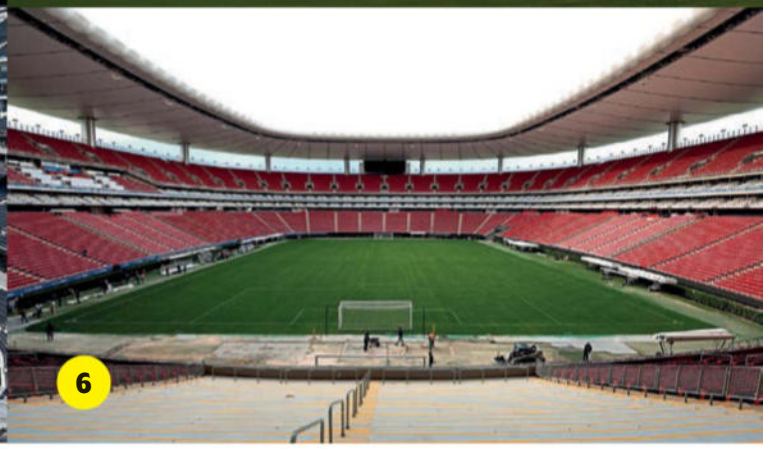
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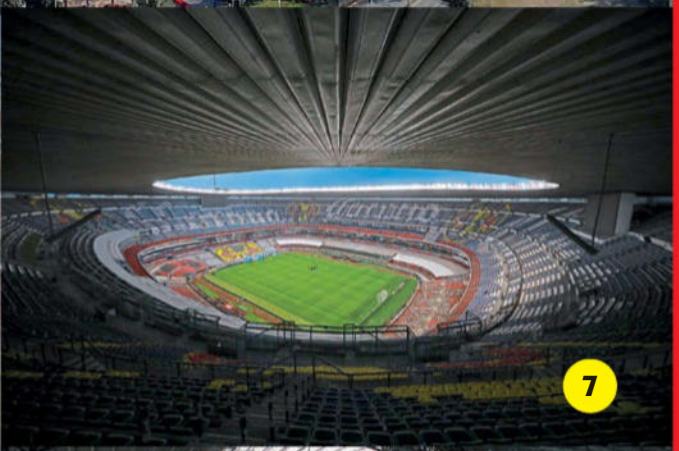


STADIUMS

1. BC PLACE VANCOUVER

Capacity: 54,000 Location: Vancouver, British Columbia

This venue's history as a home for soccer dates back to 1983, when it hosted Vancouver Whitecaps' match against Seattle Sounders in the NASL, just a day after opening. It remains home to the MLS version of the Whitecaps, as well as the gridiron team BC Lions, and has World Cup pedigree having hosted the women's final in 2015. It is located in the heart of the city beside the False Creek inlet.

2. SEATTLE STADIUM

Capacity: 69,000 Location: Seattle, Washington

Located in the heart of Seattle, Lumen Field in north west USA boasts impressive views of the downtown district in which it sits, and promises to be one of the finals' highlights. It's an area familiar with soccer, as the Sounders of MLS and Reign of the NWSL share the stadium with the city's NFL team, the Seahawks.

3. LOS ANGELES STADIUM

Capacity: 70,000 Location: Inglewood, California

Having hosted the final of USA '94 at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, the Los Angeles area will be prominent once again in 2026. This time, the state-of-the-art SoFi Stadium in Inglewood gets the nod, and the venue shared by the LA Rams and LA Chargers during the NFL season will be used until the quarter-finals. It only opened in 2020, making it the newest facility on show at the tournament.

4. ESTADIO MONTERREY

Capacity: 53,500 Location: Guadalupe, Nuevo Leon

With the 5,970-foot *Cerro de la Silla* (saddle hill) as its backdrop, Estadio BBVA in the city of Guadalupe, part of the Greater Monterrey metropolitan area, will provide the tournament with the most impressive scenery. Home of Liga MX club CF Monterrey, it will host three group-stage matches plus one in the last 32.

5. SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA STADIUM

Capacity: 71,000 Location: Santa Clara, California

Though it will be associated with a familiar city name, San Francisco, Levi's Stadium is actually located in Santa Clara, near San Jose. A roughly 45-mile trip to the stadium from San Francisco takes you through Silicon Valley to the south of the Bay. As is the case with most of the United States' host stadiums, it is used predominantly by an NFL team, in this case, the San Francisco 49ers.

6. ESTADIO GUADALAJARA

Capacity: 48,000 Location: Zapopan, Jalisco

The charming Estadio Akron on the outskirts of Guadalajara is the usual home of CD Guadalajara, better known as Chivas. It is located in the Mexican state of Jalisco, which is home to distilleries that produce 99% of the world's tequila. The stadium has a unique grassy exterior and a white roof, meant to give the impression of a volcano topped with clouds, lending it its nickname, *El Volcan*.

7. ESTADIO AZTECA

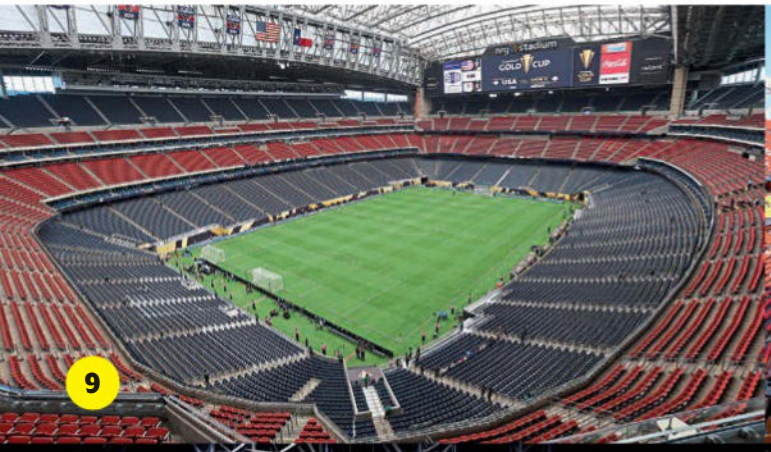
Capacity: 83,000 Location: Mexico City

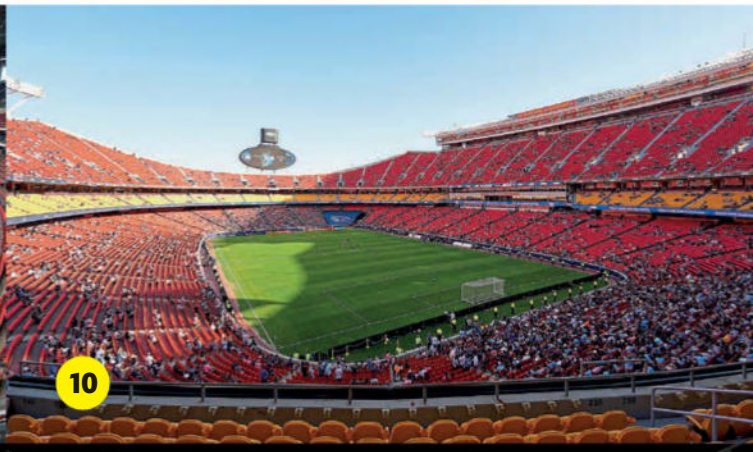
The iconic Azteca will add to its World Cup heritage by opening the tournament on June 11. It hosted 19 games across the 1970 and 1986 tournaments, including the finals at both that featured Pele and Diego Maradona respectively. It is the only 2026 venue to have previously hosted men's World Cup games, and will become the first stadium to host three World Cups. It has the second-largest capacity of the 2026 venues, and will be the grandest football theatre.

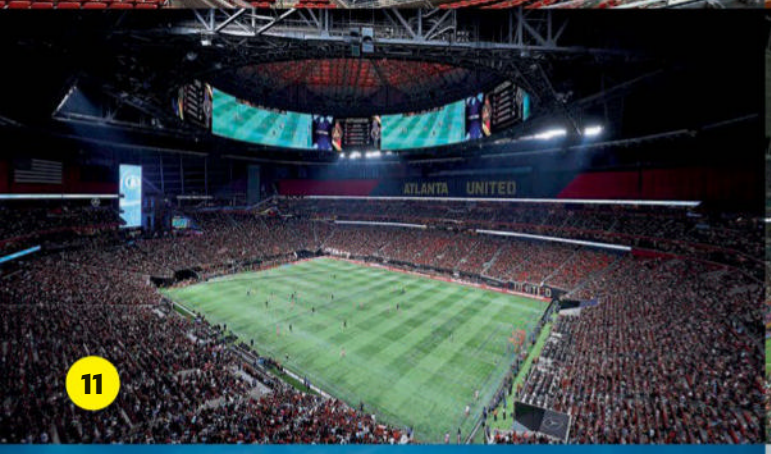
8. DALLAS STADIUM

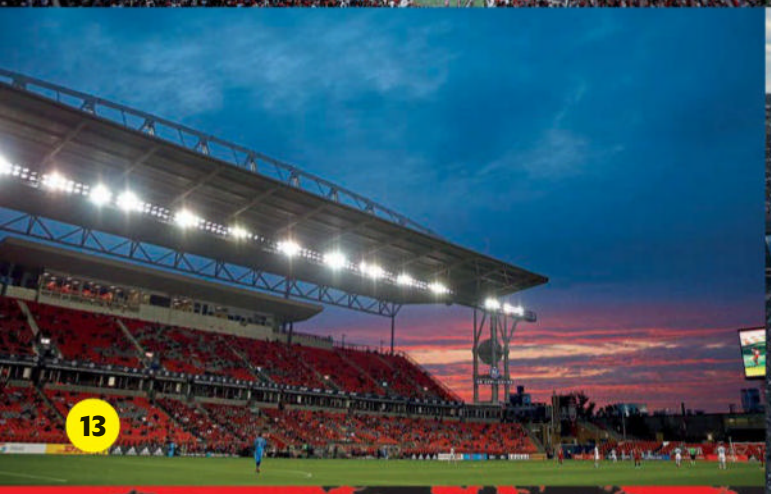
Capacity: 94,000 Location: Arlington, Texas

The largest venue at the tournament was tipped to host the final before losing out to New York/New Jersey, but that's still an indication of the scale of the AT&T Stadium, which will be used until the semi-finals. It will host more matches than any other ground at this World Cup, with nine. It could get hot on the way to the stadium, which sits between the cities of Fort Worth and Dallas in Texas, but air conditioning and a closed retractable roof will keep attendees cool in the stands.









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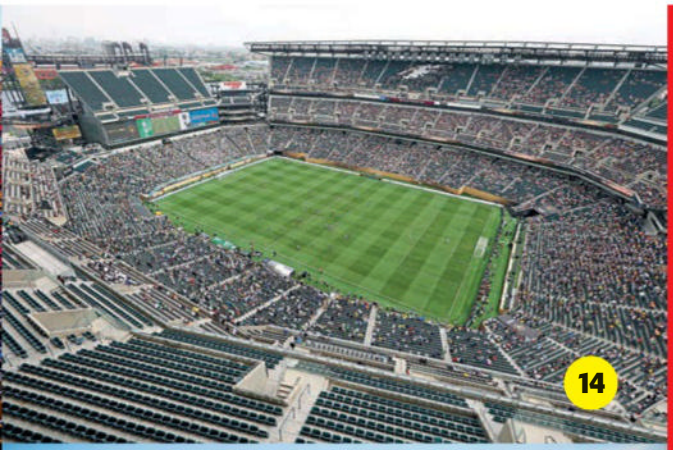
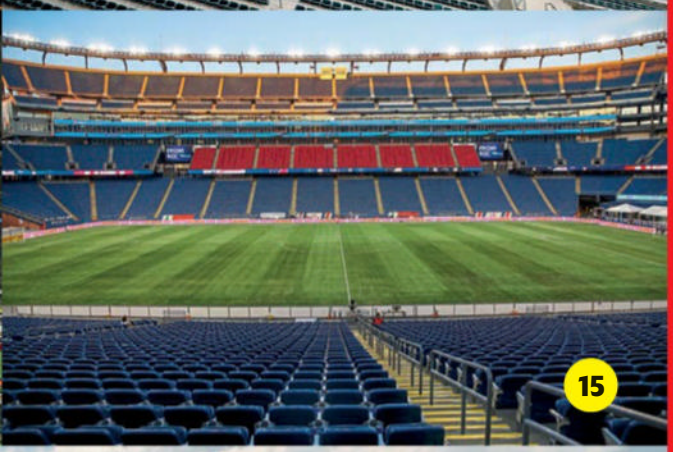




9. HOUSTON STADIUM

Capacity: 72,000 Location: Houston, Texas

The NRG Stadium warmed up for its World Cup role by hosting the 2025 CONCACAF Gold Cup final between the US and Mexico, and will host seven games. It has welcomed numerous soccer matches and events since opening in 2002, including pre-season friendlies for European clubs and Copa America fixtures.

10. KANSAS CITY STADIUM

Capacity: 73,000 Location: Kansas City, Missouri

The oldest of the US-based venues, Arrowhead Stadium is known for producing roaring atmospheres at NFL matches involving its main tenants, the Kansas City Chiefs. It holds a Guinness World Record for crowd noise in an outdoor stadium, at 142.2 decibels for a Chiefs game in September 2014. World Cup matches will be aiming to produce as raucous an atmosphere as the American football events.

11. ATLANTA STADIUM

Capacity: 75,000 Location: Atlanta, Georgia

Atlanta United fans have helped the Mercedes-Benz Stadium become a popular soccer venue that regularly boasts the highest average attendance in MLS. It has a distinctive retractable roof with a large ring-shaped video board in the middle, and is also used by the Falcons of the NFL, but the Atlanta soccer scene has made it its own, continuing to turn up through United's rough patches.

12. MIAMI STADIUM

Capacity: 65,000 Location: Miami Gardens, Florida

The Hard Rock Stadium has become familiar with soccer in recent years, having hosted games in the 2024 Copa America and the 2025 Club World Cup. Lionel Messi's presence at Inter Miami, who play home games nearby at Nu Stadium, has no doubt played a part in the increased use of the region for soccer matches, and the stadium will be used all the way up to the third-place play-off.

13. TORONTO STADIUM

Capacity: 45,000 Location: Toronto, Ontario

A short distance from the banks of Lake Ontario, BMO Field has been expanded to accommodate World Cup matches, adding almost 18,000 seats. It will host Canada's opening match against Bosnia & Herzegovina on June 12 and, as one of the nation's usual home stadiums, will witness partisan support for the co-hosts. One of the finals' more compact settings, there should be a good atmosphere at each of its five group games and solitary knockout-round match in the last 32.

14. PHILADELPHIA STADIUM

Capacity: 69,000 Location: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

One of the highlight venues of last summer's Club World Cup, Lincoln Financial Field is part of a wider sports complex at the southern end of Philly, where the city's baseball, hockey and basketball teams also play. It's home to the NFL's Philadelphia Eagles, who won the Super Bowl in 2025, and though it's known more for hosting American football, the stadium's first-ever game, in 2003, was actually a friendly between Manchester United and Barcelona.

15. BOSTON STADIUM

Capacity: 65,000 Location: Foxborough, Massachusetts

Gillette Stadium offers another link back to the 1994 World Cup, as it was built on the site of the old Foxboro Stadium used in that tournament. It is situated about 20 miles outside of Boston, on the road to Providence, Rhode Island, which is one of the reasons the teams using it during the season, the Revolution of MLS and the Patriots of the NFL, use New England in their name rather than Boston.

16. NEW YORK/NEW JERSEY STADIUM

Capacity: 82,500 Location: East Rutherford, New Jersey

MetLife Stadium, which will host the World Cup final, is situated in New Jersey's Meadowlands area, where marshes and swamps contrast with the concrete mass of the sports complex. Located beside the cosmopolitan New York metropolitan area, it's another connection to the 1994 World Cup, sitting near the site of the now-demolished Giants Stadium, which hosted a semi-final. Though opened in 2010, it's not as polished as some of the other venues, giving it more of a USA '94 feel.

Our experts give their thoughts on this summer's World Cup...

	HENRY WINTER	KEIR RADNEDGE	JONATHAN WILSON
I'm excited to see...	Bukayo Saka. England's winger can humiliate full-backs and, after missing more than two months of the season through injury, he's now moving back towards full sharpness. The time off was like a refreshing mid-season break.	How minnows like Curacao perform. It is important that at least some show up strongly to stall the trend of the major confederations shovelling them to the bottom of the heap when it comes to tournament draws.	How Brazil get on under Carlo Ancelotti. There is a strange sense that in turning to a foreigner Brazil are going back to a style that brought their great success between 1958 and 1970, but the midfield looks weak.
You might be surprised by...	Portugal, sixth favourites. Any side with a midfield of Vitinha and Joao Neves supporting Bruno Fernandes deserves respect, with the irrepressible Bernardo Silva as well. But will a static Cristiano Ronaldo be a help or hindrance?	The number of established teams who are eliminated in the group stage. Cup competitions' narratives depend on surprises. That applies as much to the World Cup as the FA Cup.	Japan, who might be the best Asian side in history. The injury to Kaoru Mitoma is extremely unfortunate, but this is a side that dominated Asian qualifying and their group looks extremely well-balanced.
I'm concerned about...	The long seasons catching up with those 150+ Premier League representatives at the tournament who haven't had a winter break. Let's hope they can resist fatigue in sapping conditions. We want stars fresh.	The overall level of these finals. More teams always means a fall in quality and the World Cup needs to maintain its hard-earned but fading football showpiece glitz.	Ticket prices, the climate, the distances, ICE... There are always worries before any World Cup kicks off, but the many off-pitch issues ahead of this tournament have raised lots of concerns.
Keep an eye out for...	More sensible use of VAR. Less of the forensic joy-killing, time-consuming variety that we see in the Premier League. More of the minimal interference, maximum benefit. Clear and obvious only, thanks.	All the fun and games which will likely follow Carlo Ancelotti's gamble with Neymar, whether he is playing or, especially, if Brazil's record goalscorer has to adjust to time sitting on the bench.	Surprise teams reaching the last 16 and quarters. Eight groups of four was perfect; this format is a shambles: a lot of essentially meaningless games in the group stage before a sudden injection of jeopardy in the last 32.
The Golden Boot will be won by...	Harry Kane. England are set up to feed their talismanic captain. Clever movement, clinical finishing, plus he will win and take penalties. At 32, this is probably his last World Cup and he aims to seize the moment.	Kylian Mbappe, based on my own slight favouring of France as eventual winners. He has the provocation of memory from 2022 and, at 27, he is in the prime of his career.	Kylian Mbappe – a reliably good finisher in probably the best squad. He's already scored 12 goals in two World Cups; Miroslav Klose's record of 16 could easily fall at this tournament.
The Player of the Tournament will be...	Michael Olise, who causes havoc for France with his technique and ability to beat opponents. England will watch his prominence with frustration, given he was born and raised in London.	Lionel Messi, even if partly because of goodwill accrued from previous tournaments – as long as defending champions Argentina go deep into the knockout stages.	Lamine Yamal. The 18-year-old is exciting and technically gifted in a way that nobody else at the tournament quite is. The big doubt, though, is over his fitness as he struggles back from a hamstring injury.
The winners will be...	Spain. European champions brimming with togetherness, intelligence and individual ability. With just one caveat: they'll need Lamine Yamal to regain sharpness quickly after his hamstring injury.	France, partly because of the talent available but above all through Didier Deschamps' matchless experience in tournament management.	Spain, the best side at Euro 2024. Nico Williams' lack of game time could cost them that exhilarating directness, especially if Yamal also isn't fully fit. But their ability to retain possession in the heat will be a major asset.

TIM VICKERY

MARK GLEESON

JOHN DUERDEN

JAMIE EVANS

The African performance. The best justification for the expansion of the World Cup is the fact that Africa was so under-represented in a 32-team tournament. What can they do given more opportunities?

Starboy ...Saka

Whether an African team can better what Morocco did in Qatar and reach the final. The continent has certainly come a long way over the last half-century but needs a bigger impact at the World Cup.

If Asia can send a team to the last eight for the first time since 2002. With nine representatives, there needs to be a few going through to the knockout stages and one, probably Japan, going quite deep.

Some legendary South American playmakers at their final World Cup: Lionel Messi, Neymar and James Rodriguez. Slower-paced games could be perfect conditions for some classy No.10s to pull the strings.

Japan, although we probably shouldn't be. They showed very clearly in Qatar that they can operate in bursts, where for little phases they are hard to handle. This approach could suit the conditions perfectly.

Ones to watch... Japan

The confidence Senegal bring to the tournament and the belief they have that they can go all the way. They have, arguably, much more depth in their squad than any previous African squad at the World Cup.

How the Asian teams handle the conditions. Given some of the fairly brutal heat and, sometimes humidity, that players are accustomed to, it should give them some advantage over European teams at least.

Ecuador. If defensive football is to be the tactical trend of these finals then a side with Moises Caicedo in front of a collection of top defenders, who only conceded five goals in qualifying, have the potential to go a long way.

The conditions. Extreme heat at the end of a gruelling season is really going to take a toll on the players. It ruined the 1994 final, and I doubt we'll see anything to match the decider in Qatar.

Soaring temperatures... Infantino cools off

Too many African sides going out early despite it being relatively easy to get past the opening round, with the eight best third-placed finishers also advancing to the knockout stages.

Saudi Arabia. Changing head coach from Herve Renard to Georgios Donis less than two months before the big kick-off is not a good sign. Those group games against Spain and Uruguay could be painful.

England, whose hopes seem to rest on their tournament experience and world-class match-winners rather than a convincing body of work under Thomas Tuchel. Will it all click into place during the finals?

The man in the navy suit (if he wears it in the heat), Paraguay coach Gustavo Alfaro. Low-profile, serious, but his connection to the game's traditional values is almost spiritual, and much needed in the current game.

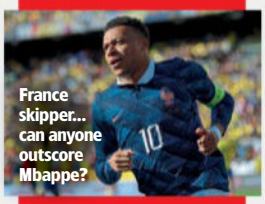
World Cup coaching debut... Ancelotti

Some very young and special African talent, like Ibrahim Mbaye of Senegal and the South African duo of Mbekezeli Mbokazi and Relebohile Mofokeng.

Mousa Al Tamari of Jordan. The baker's son from Amman has long been the country's biggest star and a rare export to Europe. With injuries to other key attackers, the winger is ready to step up.

Mexico wonderkid Gilberto Mora. The idea of a teenager stepping up to the plate for his country on home soil has the potential to be one of the great World Cup stories. Or, it could all prove to be too much, too soon for the midfielder.

Tough to predict, but how about Vinicius Junior? A couple of straightforward group games, plus the presence of Carlo Ancelotti, who encouraged him to cut in on goal at Real Madrid, could put him in contention.



France skipper... can anyone outscore Mbappe?

Kylian Mbappe. The incredible pace and finishing ability of the Frenchman set him apart from his peers.

Harry Kane. It doesn't mean that England will win, of course, but the Three Lions are likely to go far which means that the Bayern Munich striker should be scoring plenty.

Erling Haaland. Norway have been branded "dark horses" by some, but there should be nothing surprising about a team with one of the most devastating goalscorers in the world going far in the tournament.

Whoever has enough gas in the tank to last through to the end of the competition. Nursed along by his coach, it could be Kylian Mbappe

Wonderkid ...Yamal

Mbappe again. His impact is going to be key to his country's hopes. He is a player perfectly built for a tournament like this.

Kylian Mbappe. Not the most imaginative choice but after a troubled season at Real Madrid, if the France superstar is fully fit this summer, he could put on a show for the world.

If Portugal do as well as I expect, then one of their midfield schemers will take the Golden Ball – probably Vitinha. His ability, along with his PSG team-mate Joao Neves, to look after the ball will be vital in the heat.

France. I was really struck by them in the March friendlies, first against Brazil and then the reserves giving Colombia a thrashing. Their strength in depth is terrifying.

Team to beat...France

France. They were most unfortunate not to win four years ago and have the strongest squad at the finals. I think we will see European success in the Americas again after the Germans won in 2014.

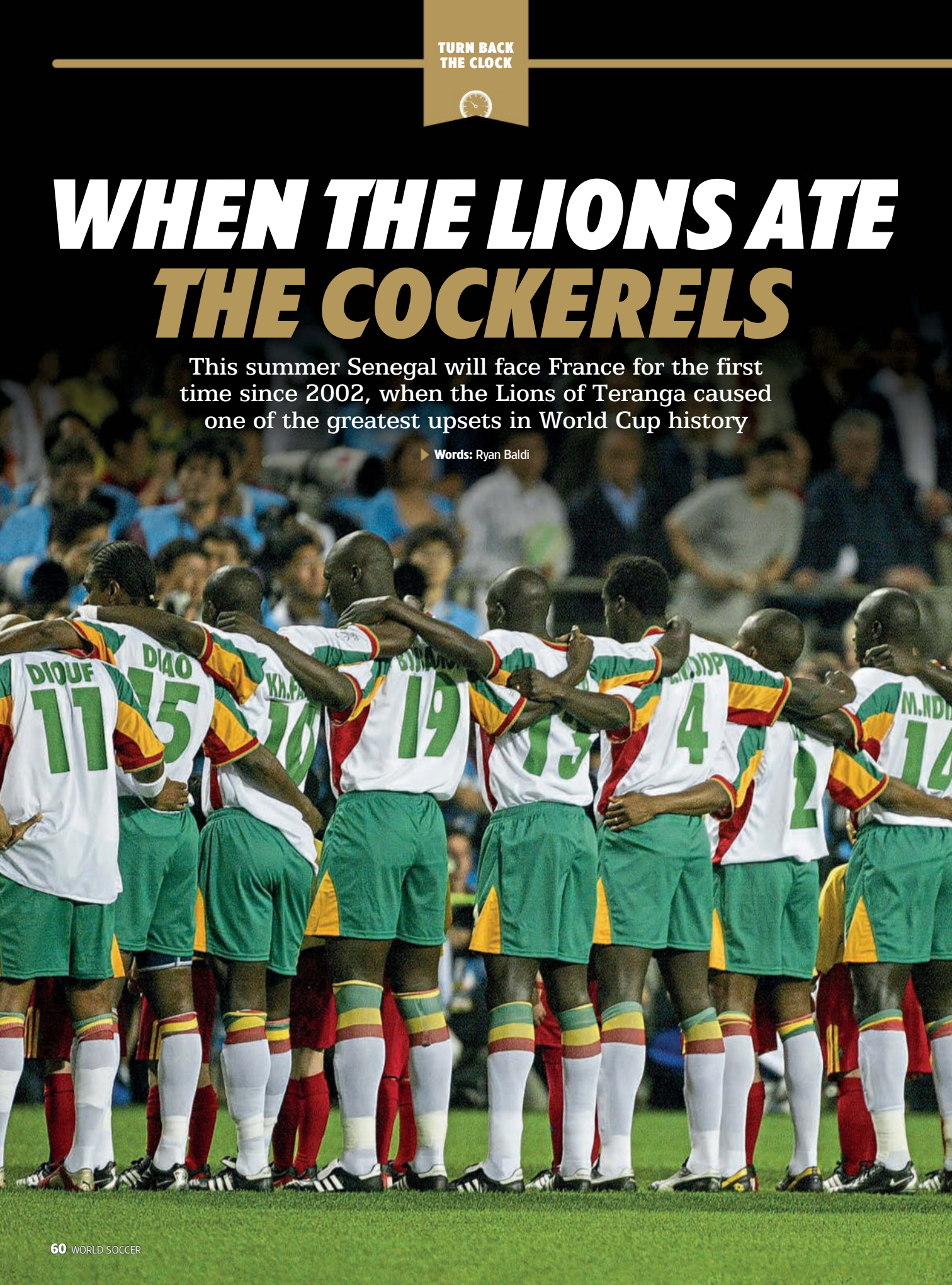
France. With the talent at their disposal, it is hard to look past the two-time champions. Spain are also obvious contenders, while the South American giants may benefit from playing relatively close to home.

Portugal. We're due a new name on the trophy, and the combination of a world-class midfield with the experience of winning the UEFA Nations League makes the *Selecao* strong candidates – as long as Ronaldo takes a backseat.

WHEN THE LIONS ATE THE COCKERELS

This summer Senegal will face France for the first time since 2002, when the Lions of Teranga caused one of the greatest upsets in World Cup history

Words: Ryan Baldi



2002 World Cup curtain-raiser...Senegal players sing the national anthem ahead of the finals' opening game

In the long history of the World Cup, there are shocks, and then there are ruptures. Some results do more than tilt a tournament; they crack the sport wide open. On May 31, 2002, in Seoul, South Korea, one of those ruptures arrived wearing white, green, gold and red. France 0-1 Senegal.

France entered the tournament as reigning world and European champions, having lifted the trophies on home soil in 1998 and at Euro 2000 in Belgium and the Netherlands. Their squad was a constellation: Zinedine Zidane, Thierry Henry, Patrick Vieira, Marcel Desailly, Lilian Thuram, David Trezeguet. They were, by consensus, the best team on the planet. Senegal, by contrast, were World Cup debutants.

This was the first game of the tournament, and it was supposed to be something of a coronation. Instead, it was a regicide.

The story of that night begins, fittingly, with laughter.

El Hadji Diouf remembered it clearly: watching the World Cup draw with his club team-mates at Lens as France were paired with Senegal. The reaction was immediate and dismissive.

"They all got up and started to make fun of me," Diouf recalled. Senegal, in their eyes, had "no chance".

French media reportedly spoke of a comfortable win – some even suggesting a rout. This, they said, would be the perfect warm-up for the tougher tests of Uruguay and Denmark before, inevitably, the knockout rounds.

Senegal heard it all. And they internalised it.

"We'd heard so many things," Diouf said. "We said to ourselves: 'We're lions. How could a cockerel eat a lion?'"

There was pride in that metaphor, but also something deeper: a refusal to accept the script.

Senegal's squad was built not on global stardom but on cohesion. All but two of the players were based in France; several were born there or had come through French academies. They knew their opponents intimately – not as distant idols, but as colleagues and peers.

"For us, it wasn't like we played against world champions," midfielder Salif Diao later said. "It was like we were playing against friends."

That familiarity stripped away fear. In its place: belief.

From the first whistle inside the Seoul World Cup Stadium, the game's expected rhythm never quite materialised.

For France, the first blow came five days before the game. In a warm-up friendly against co-hosts South Korea, their talisman Zidane tore a muscle in his thigh, ruling him out of the tournament's curtain-raiser.

In his absence, Youri Djorkaeff, another hero of 1998, took on the role of playmaker-in-chief. With Vieira and Emmanuel Petit behind, *Les Bleus* sought to impose themselves with patient possession, dictating the tempo, and spreading the ball out to Henry and Sylvain Wiltord on the wings.

On paper, the gulf in technical quality was obvious. But Senegal refused to play along. They pressed aggressively, closing down space with startling speed. Captain Aliou Cisse snapped into challenges in midfield, while full-backs Omar Daf and Ferdinand Coly pushed up the flanks with fearless intent. Every French touch was met with contact, every passing lane contested. Within minutes, the tone set.

Diouf, electric and fearless, became the focal point. He drifted across the frontline, dragging defenders with him, testing the French defence with bursts of acceleration. In the tenth minute, he forced Desailly into an awkward clearance; moments later, he darted between two defenders, drawing a foul that hinted at the reigning champions' vulnerability.

France, for all their pedigree, looked unsettled.

Their pre-tournament warm-ups had been unconvincing. They drew 0-0 with Russia, lost 2-1 to Belgium and only beat the South Koreans with a last-minute winner having trailed 2-1 at half-time.

Most expected them to find their best form once the tournament kicked off. But as the first game unfolded, they looked toothless.

In the early exchanges, their best chance came through Henry, who latched onto a through ball and drove into the box, only to be denied by a perfectly timed intervention from centre-back Lamine Diatta. It was a reminder of France's latent threat, but also of Senegal's readiness.

"We knew our strength was in defence," Diao said later. "And on the counter-attack, we were 100% sure that Plan A was going to work."

The breakthrough, when it came, felt both sudden and inevitable.

In the 30th minute, Senegal sprang forward with devastating simplicity. A quick turnover in midfield released Diouf down the left flank. He surged past Frank Leboeuf, his stride long and controlled, before driving a low ball into the penalty area. What followed was chaos.

The cross was deflected, the ball ricocheted awkwardly off a defender,

then hit goalkeeper Fabien Barthez and squirmed loose. Papa Bouba Diop reacted first, lunging, stretching, forcing the ball towards goal, and the net rippled.

For a heartbeat, there was silence. Then shock, disbelief, recalibration. When the noise arrived, it was a roar that carried across continents.

Diop – who tragically died in 2020 aged just 42 – wheeled away towards the corner flag, team-mates piling on top of him in a celebration that was equal parts joy and defiance. It remains one of the enduring images of the tournament: bodies stacked, arms raised, history in motion.

Conceding first did not immediately awaken France. If anything, it deepened their uncertainty.

Without Zidane's creativity, their attack lacked cohesion. Djorkaeff drifted in search of influence, Wiltord struggled to find space and Henry – so often devastating – found himself isolated against a compact, disciplined defence.

Senegal, meanwhile, grew into the game. They ran, harried, tackled and countered with increasing confidence.

Dejected...France players after going behind

Diouf nearly doubled the lead before half-time, cutting inside and unleashing a shot that flashed narrowly wide. Each attack carried menace; each defensive stand drew louder cheers.

At the break, the scoreboard read 1-0. But the psychological balance felt even more lopsided. The second half would be an exercise in resistance and resilience.

France emerged with greater urgency, pushing their full-backs

Scrappy...Senegal midfielder Papa Bouba Diop bundles the ball into the French goal

Leading from the front...Senegal forward El Hadji Diouf bursts past *Les Bleus* defender Frank Leboeuf

higher and committing more bodies forward. Trezeguet entered the fray, offering a more direct threat in the box. Crosses began to rain in, testing Senegal's defensive organisation. And yet, the equaliser never came.

Instead, Senegal produced one of the most disciplined defensive displays in modern World Cup history.

Cisse anchored the midfield with tireless energy, breaking up play and distributing calmly under pressure. The backline held its shape, stepping forward in unison, clearing danger with authority. Goalkeeper Tony Sylva – who'd spent most of the previous decade as a back-up at Monaco in Ligue 1 – commanded his penalty area with confidence, claiming crosses and organising his defence.

France's chances, when they came, were fleeting. Wiltord fired over from distance. Trezeguet saw a header drift wide. Henry, tightly marked throughout, struggled to impose himself. The rhythm was disjointed, the urgency bordering on desperation.

"They were more physical than us and better than us," Vieira admitted afterwards.

As the clock ticked into the final ten minutes, tension tightened around the stadium.

France threw numbers forward, their attacks increasingly frantic. Long balls replaced measured build-up. Shots came from improbable angles. The champions were searching not just for a goal, but for control. Senegal refused to yield.

Every clearance was met with cheers. Every interception felt decisive. When Diouf broke free late on, driving toward goal before being denied, it served as a reminder – even now, Senegal remained dangerous.

Then came the whistle. Full-time.

The players collapsed to the turf, some in exhaustion, others in disbelief.

> "We said to ourselves: 'We're lions. How could a cockerel eat a lion?'"
>
> **Senegal forward El Hadji Diouf**

Inside the Senegal camp, the victory had been imagined long before it was realised.

On the eve of the match, the late Bruno Metsu, Senegal's French head coach, had issued a challenge to his players amid off-field distractions and rising tension. "If we win this game," he said, "it will be an earthquake in the world." He was right.

His opposite number, Roger Lemerre, was complimentary after the game. "It's a big, big performance for Senegal," he said. "They used good tactics and they played very well.

"Senegal were well-organised with a five-man midfield...we were not able to cut through their defensive net. They had one counter-attack and they scored. That's football but we would have liked a happier start."

France centre-back Leboeuf made it clear on what the team missed most: "We needed Zizou [Zidane] to keep the ball," he said. "This is a collective and not an individual defeat. Zidane can't be replaced and Youri [Djorkaeff] has done his best."

The shock reverberated globally – not just because of the scoreline, but because of what it symbolised. A debutant defeating the reigning world and European champions in the opening match of the World Cup. Few results have ever carried such weight.

"It was the performance we all dreamt," Metsu said later. "We went out there and made it happen."

And Diouf, never one for understatement, would go further still. "Senegal's win over France is the greatest victory the tournament has ever seen," he said.

That might sound like hyperbole, but the former Liverpool, Blackburn Rovers and Bolton Wanderers forward's assertion was not without merit. World Cup history is rich with shocks. The United States defeating England in 1950. North Korea toppling Italy in 1966. Cameroon stunning reigning world champions Argentina at Italia '90. Saudi Arabia's

victory over Argentina in 2022. But Senegal's win belongs in the innermost circle of that pantheon when considered in full context.

France were not just champions; they were dominant champions, fresh off a golden era. Their squad was stacked with players at the peak of their powers, many of whom had just completed trophy-laden club seasons.

Senegal, meanwhile, were making their World Cup debut. They had never played France, their former colonial rulers, before. On paper, it was a mismatch of the highest order.

Then consider the stage: the opening match of the tournament, with the entire world watching.

France did not recover. After drawing 0-0 with Uruguay in the next game in Busan, they rushed a clearly unfit Zidane back from injury for the decisive third match with Denmark but lost 2-0 in Incheon, exiting at the group stage without scoring a single goal. It remains the worst performance by a defending champion in World Cup history.

Senegal, by contrast, finished second in the group behind the Danes and rode the momentum all the way to the quarter-finals, matching the best-ever performance by an African nation at the time.

Injured...Zinedine Zidane watches on in despair from the touchline

World Cup rematches

France and Senegal aren't the only sides that will be reacquainted at this summer's World Cup...

MEXICO v SOUTH AFRICA

Sixteen years on from kicking things off at the 2010 World Cup in Africa, these two will take part in the curtain-raiser at Mexico's Estadio Azteca.

ALGERIA v AUSTRIA

Grouped together for the first time since 1982, when Austria and West Germany advanced at the expense of Algeria after the controversial "Disgrace of Gijon".

Midfield battle... Diop challenges the Senegalese-born Patrick Vieira

Street party...Senegal supporters celebrate on the streets of Paris

This was not just an upset. It was a reversal of hierarchy.

For Senegal, the victory carried layers of meaning that transcended football.

"There was an occasion for Africa to say: 'Yes, we can beat the colonial power,'" former Liverpool and Stoke City midfielder Diao reflected.

The historical ties between Senegal and France added emotional weight to the encounter. Many Senegalese players had grown up in France, developed in its system and even faced choices about national allegiance. Even Dakar-born Vieira could have played this game in a white shirt instead of a blue one.

> "We needed Zizou to keep the ball. This a collective and not an individual defeat. Zidane can't be replaced"
>
> France defender Frank Leboeuf

That complexity made the result resonate more deeply.

And yet, within the squad, the mood was not political so much as familial.

"We were a solid unit, full of good friends," Diouf said. "We wanted to make our families proud."

In the days that followed the win, Senegal's players watched as their achievement spread across the globe.

"We were being talked about all over the world," Diouf remembered. "We had achieved something extraordinary."

It changed careers. It changed perceptions. It changed possibilities.

For African football, it reinforced a growing truth: the gap was closing. The days of token participation were over. Teams from the continent could compete – not just with anyone, but with everyone.

And for the World Cup itself, it served as a reminder of its essential magic. Because for all the analysis, the rankings, the predictions, the data – football at its highest level remains gloriously unpredictable.

Two decades on, the image still lingers. Diop sliding in, the ball crossing the line, the pile of bodies in celebration. It is replayed not just because it was surprising, but because it was transformative.

Senegal did not merely defeat France. They redefined what was possible for a debutant, for an underdog, for a team that refused to accept their assigned role. For 90 minutes in Seoul, pedigree meant nothing, reputation meant less, and belief meant everything. The Lions of Teranga devoured the Cockerels.

BRAZIL v SCOTLAND

It feels fitting that 28 years on from their last World Cup appearance, Scotland will play two of the sides they faced at France '98: Brazil and Morocco.

ENGLAND v CROATIA

Many of the Croatia players that beat England in the semi-finals at Russia 2018 will play this summer, including captain Luka Modric and goalscorer Ivan Perisic.

COPA 71

In 1970, Mexico hosted the ninth edition of the men's FIFA World Cup. A year later, it welcomed the second women's World Cup. Unofficial, unrecognised and unwelcome, the tournament's impact was almost forgotten – until now

Words: Jon Bonfiglio

Their defining memory, on getting off the plane in Mexico City, was being greeted by a wall of flashlights. "I remember Chris [Lockwood] saying there must be somebody really famous on the plane," explains former footballer Trudy McCaffery, "and we had no idea that those photographers were actually all waiting there for *us*."

It was August 1971, and the 14 women – all teenagers bar two who were still in their early twenties – and their manager, Harry Batt, had arrived in Mexico as the "British Independents" to participate in COPA 71, the unofficial women's World Cup tournament. Whatever their formal title, throughout the tournament they would be known, addressed, and lauded everywhere they went as "*Las Inglesas*", or the "*Chicas* de Carnaby Street."

What followed were huge crowds, all-encompassing sponsorship, wall-to-wall media – including televised games – and sold-out matches at one of the biggest stadiums on the planet. By any standards, the tournament was an enormous success, and everything seemed to indicate that COPA 71 would be a watershed moment for women's football.

Just three weeks later, however, on landing back in London days after playing in front of more than 90,000 people at the iconic Estadio Azteca, the players were surprised to find Heathrow Airport arrivals hall empty. No supporters waiting for them, no media desperate to hear their story. Not a single flashlight.

"It was flat," says midfielder Lockwood. "Then, after a little while, we found out we were banned. And that was it."

The women were prohibited from playing for three months by the FA, with their captain Carol Wilson receiving a six-month ban. For his part, coach and manager Batt was forbidden for life from further engagement with football. The FA's motivation for the punishment was clear: the women had transgressed, and they were being punished.

"We didn't speak about it because I suppose inside us, we felt ashamed," says Lockwood, the sadness in her voice inescapable, even half a century on. "I didn't want anybody to feel like that again, so we shut it away."

"Nobody asked because nobody knew," adds McCaffery, "and we didn't

The Lost Lionesses ...England women's 1971 team pose for a photo with manager Harry Batt

talk about it because there just didn't seem to be a way to do that. And little by little, I guess we just all withdrew, didn't we? Back into our own little worlds."

Silence ensues, as the women find themselves once again on the precipice of the memory and its significance more than half a century later as they all sit together in Mexico City, back where it all happened. Eventually, it's Lockwood who pushes through, underlining the scale of the impact these events had on all their lives: "We never saw each other for 47 years after that."

★

Women's football in England was officially banned on December 5, 1921. The FA described the sport as "unsuitable for females," arguing that women's bodies would be harmed and likely damage their child-bearing capacities. The truth, however, was much darker: a stringent reaction driven by the incredible burgeoning popularity of women's football during the First World War, and the fear that it would threaten and eventually supplant the men's game.

England wasn't alone. From the late 19th century, "women's football and its history has been erased," says Brenda Elsey, historian specialising in politics, soccer and gender at Hofstra University in New York. "Brazil, for instance, had the most strict law against women's football in history, from 1941 to 1979. The ban there was much more draconian than in England. In England it had to do with regulation games," whereas in Brazil it related to "women playing football in any informal or educational spaces." If a woman so much as kicked a ball in Rio, in 1978, she could be criminally charged for doing so.

Perhaps even more remarkably, women's football in Brazil wasn't new at the time of the ban; there had already been a highly successful professional league developing in the country. But when matches started taking place at major stadiums such as the Estadio Pacaembu in 1941, the municipal stadium of Sao Paulo, the government reacted, and punishment was swift. Only weeks later, Brazilian president Getulio Vargas signed a decree criminalising the participation of women in multiple sports, including football.

Similar bans were enforced elsewhere around the world: in Germany between 1955 and 1970 and in France from 1941 to 1970 to name but two. Internationally, governmental authorities and footballing administrators had succeeded in all but crushing the sport.

★

When COPA 71 was held in Mexico, the ban had only just been lifted in England. Growing up, Lockwood, McCaffery and their team-mates had mostly been forced to play with local boys. More than one of them had hid the fact that they were a girl in order to be allowed participation. In many ways, the backstory for all the English women footballers who participated in COPA 71 is the same: playing in parks, sometimes with male gangs. "You couldn't play for the school team, not like you can now," says Lockwood. All of them, at one time or another, thought that they were the only girl in the world that played; they had never met one another.

Into this context, it's all the more remarkable that the Federation of Independent European Female Football (FIEFF), supported financially by Italian drinks company Martini & Rossi, managed to bring together six national teams for the COPA 71 tournament in Mexico. Participating were Argentina, Denmark, England, France, Italy and Mexico – all convinced to attend on the back of another successful, unofficial tournament held in Italy the year before.

"We had no awareness of the politics and everything that was going on in the

Reunited... the England and Mexico players met up in Mexico City earlier this year
Credit: Alan Pfeiffer

background because, to be fair, we were young and all we wanted to do was play football," says McCaffery. "We didn't really get all of that."

What the women did realise though, on arrival, was that they had been dropped right into the middle of a huge sporting event, the likes of which they had never even conceived.

"We had such a fantastic time, and we saw such great football, these women playing football like we'd never seen before," adds McCaffery. "And to us, although we were playing against them, they were real role models. It was really something to take away, the overwhelming enthusiasm for the sport, the openness as well to the entire event, which was an unusual series of circumstances that came together, given what was taking place elsewhere in the world."

Lockwood, in fact, had no notion that they were scheduled to play at the Estadio Azteca: "We'd only played in parks until then, because the FA wouldn't let us play on their pitches. We loved the game so much. We all remember how much we loved it."

In what was another watershed moment, the Mexican broadcasters televised all the tournament matches live, making it the first time that Lockwood or McCaffery had ever seen women play on television.

The live coverage and the accompanying media focus also made COPA 71 hugely culturally significant for Mexico as a nation; almost anyone who was a teenager or older in the country in 1971 still remembers that summer, and how the unofficial women's World Cup took the country by storm. Over time, the tournament and the mood that surrounded it would become a fundamental part of Mexico's personally remembered histories of the decade.

> "Women's football and its history has been erased"
>
> **Brenda Elsey, historian**

★

FIFA, for its part, prefers the narrative that women's football didn't emerge until 20 years later – at the inaugural FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991 – in isolation of any prior events. "History confers legitimacy," says Elsey. "When you hear FIFA talk about, 'well, they just started playing, look at all the progress,' that's nothing less than a historical erasure... which is to use this false sense of chronology to justify a lack of equal resources. So history, as we know, is always political, and is always at the service of someone. Sometimes it can speak truth to those powers, if we're lucky."

One of those truths is that the COPA 71 final between Denmark and Mexico, played on September 5, 1971, remains almost certainly the highest attended women's sports event in history, drawing an estimated 110,000 spectators to the Estadio Azteca.

Among those watching that day, sat in the stands, were Lockwood and McCaffery. Their England side had been eliminated in the group stage, but their enthusiasm was undimmed – they knew that, more than supporting a side, what they were cheering was the sport and its possibilities.

As the world once again embarks on North America for a global finals this summer, Lockwood, McCaffery and their team-mates are remembered as being present at a moment of history: every one of them a pioneer; each one a Lioness.

COPA 71: The Lost Lionesses, is available to watch on BBC iPlayer

From the scrapbook... memories of COPA 71
Credit: Alan Pfeiffer

Glenn Moore

Double defeat for Kang

The ambitious multi-club owner lost two continental finals in one day, but remains a huge presence in the women's game

Michele Kang, arguably the biggest individual investor in women's football and certainly one of the sport's leading disrupters, was denied a remarkable double by the brilliance of Barcelona and resilience of Club America.

Kang, a 66-year-old Korean-born American businesswoman, owns OL Lyonnes, Washington Spirit and London City Lionesses. In May, on the same day, Lyonnes and Spirit were both competing in continental championship finals. Lyonnes were taking on Barcelona in Oslo, with Spirit facing Liga MX Femenil's America in Pachuca, Mexico.

Lyonnes went down 4-0, a slightly harsh scoreline even if Barca deserved to win. Eight hours later Spirit lost a chaotic game 5-3 having led 3-2 after an hour.

While the CONCACAF W Champions Cup is a relatively new event, with a hierarchy still being established, the UEFA Champions League has a firm pecking order and the two finalists are at the top of the European game.

Lyonnes and Barcelona have won ten of the last 11 finals – the exception being Arsenal's surprise victory last year, when the Gunners overcame Lyon (as they were then branded) in the semis and Barca in the final.

Of those ten, Lyon won the first five, Barca four of the subsequent quintet including the last three. Four finals have pitted these two giants against each other, Lyon winning in 2019 and 2022, Barca 2024 and this year.

Those statistics aptly sum up the changing of the guard: over the decade, Barca's predominantly Spanish collective has usurped Lyon's multi-national squad of stars.

However, if Lyon's 2022 win in Turin felt like the last hurrah of the *ancien regime*, Barca having won their first title the year before against Chelsea, this may be the Catalans' final flourish before the French club reasserts its supremacy.

That might seem surprising, but while Kang continues to invest heavily Barca have been cutting back. Four of the starters in the final – Alexia Putellas, Caroline Graham Hansen, Mapi Leon and Ona Batlle – are out of contract, with Putellas linked with a move to Kang's WSL outfit, London City Lionesses.

That said, it would be rash to write off Barcelona given the quality coming through the production line at *La Masia*. For example, Clara Serrajordi, 18, stood in for Aitana Bonmati, who continued her return from November's broken leg with a substitute appearance.

Then there's Salma Paralluelo, who seems to have been around for years but is just 22. Her two late goals put a gloss on the victory but also highlighted her quality.

> Lyonnes' progress to the final, overcoming first-leg deficits at Wolfsburg in the quarters and Arsenal in the semis, underscored their revival under Kang

Cata Coll, who made two key saves when the game was in the balance, is 25, Esmee Brugts is 22, Claudia Pina 24 and Vicky Lopez, who was not even required in Oslo, 19.

A further reason to believe Barca will be a threat to Lyonnes for many years yet is the way the system endures regardless of personnel. The last time these teams met in the final, Jonatan Giraldez was in the Barca dugout. Kang had already lured him to Washington and he joined Spirit after the final. A year on he switched to Lyon. This time the Barca hot seat was occupied by his former assistant, Pere Romeu, and the apprentice bested the master.

Dominant... Barca skipper Alexia Putellas lifts another Champions League trophy

More than anyone, the final was a triumph for Barca's Ewa Pajor. The Poland striker scored in both legs of the 12-2 aggregate drubbing of Real Madrid in the quarter-finals, then again in both legs of the semi-final defeat of Bayern Munich, a 1-1 draw in Germany followed by a 4-2 win at Camp Nou.

But she has five Champions League final losers' medals, four acquired with Wolfsburg, one with Barcelona last year, and when she squandered two fine first-half chances Pajor must have thought: "here we go again."

However, ten minutes into the second half she pulled away from Ingrid Engen and slid a smart shot inside Christiane Endler's far post. In the 69th minute, with Lyonnes' defence all at sea, she tapped in a second.

Paralluelo's double iced Barca's cake and further soured Kang's afternoon. Nevertheless, Lyonnes' progress to the final, overcoming first-leg deficits at Wolfsburg in the quarters and Arsenal in the semis, underscored their revival under Kang.

Barcelona will now progress to the second FIFA Women's Champions Cup, scheduled for January 2027.

Beaten finalists... OL Lyonnes owner Michele Kang watches her side's defeat

That will be held in Miami but there will be no NWSL representation after America beat both of the league's representatives in the CONCACAF W Champions Cup denouement.

While Spirit beat hosts Pachuca 1-0 in one semi, America thrashed holders Gotham FC in the other 4-1, San Diego-born Mexico international Scarlett Camberos notching a hat-trick.

In an eventful final, America took an early two-goal lead only for Spirit to bounce back with three goals and go in front within an hour. But Brazilian forward Geyse equalised shortly afterwards, pouncing on a Sandy MacIver error to score her second and change the match's momentum. Irene Guerrero scored a fourth before a late Esme Morgan own goal in the 96th minute put the result beyond doubt.

Asia also crowned new club champions, and of geopolitical note, as North Korea's Naegohyang won the title in the South Korean city of Suwon.

Naegohyang became the first sports team from the north to visit the south in eight years when they crossed the 38th parallel to play Suwon FC in the semi-final, winning 2-1. They stayed on to defeat Tokyo Verdy in the final 1-0, with a goal from Kim Kyong-yong. Tokyo had reached the final with a 3-1 win over Melbourne City, also in Suwon.

The other three FIFA Women's Champions Cup entrants will be decided in July (Oceania), October (South America) and, probably, November (Africa).

Round-up

Winning goal... Maika Hamano after scoring the winner in the Asian Cup final

WSL POWERS JAPAN TO VICTORY

Japan won the 2026 Asian Cup in style, winning all six matches, scoring 29 goals and conceding just once.

Hosts Australia gave them the toughest match, in the final. But despite being roared on by 74,397 in Sydney, the Matildas rarely threatened after Chelsea's Maika Hamano, on loan at Tottenham Hotspur in 2026, gave Japan a 17th-minute lead with an exquisite curling shot from the edge of the box.

Kang Chae-rim, the Montreal Roses midfielder, was the only player to score against the *Nadeshiko*, but it was a mere consolation in a 4-1 semi-final defeat. In the other semi, holders China lost 2-1 to Australia.

Ten of Japan's starting XI in the final played in the WSL in 2025-26 and eight of the Australian team, a startling demonstration of the globalisation of the women's game and the WSL's financial muscle.

CITY RECLAIM ENGLISH TITLE

Manchester City won their first WSL title in a decade, achieved by Sweden's Andree Jeglertz in his first season as coach. City were helped by not being in Europe, but were comfortable winners in the end, finishing four points clear of Arsenal.

Staying put... Manchester City's Khadija Shaw

Chelsea, champions the previous six times, claimed third and the remaining European place with Manchester United missing out in fourth.

Player of the Year Khadija "Bunny" Shaw spearheaded City's title charge with 21 goals. The Jamaican then signed a new contract until 2030.

Leicester City were relegated after a penalty-shootout defeat in the play-off with Charlton Athletic, who came up with Birmingham City and Crystal Palace with the WSL expanding to 14.

HEARTS FIND CONSOLATION

A week after their men's team lost the title to Celtic, the women had a similar task – to avoid defeat at Edinburgh rivals and defending champions Hibernian. They failed, but won the Scottish crown for the first time anyway as Rangers capitulated 6-0 at Glasgow City.

After Glasgow won 14 successive titles, the SWPL has become Europe's most competitive: the last five have been won by Rangers, Glasgow City, Celtic, Hibs and now Hearts.

FAMILIAR WINNERS ELSEWHERE

Bayern Munich won their fourth German Bundesliga league title in succession by 16 points from Wolfsburg. The pair have finished first or second for 12 successive seasons. Eintracht Frankfurt claimed the other European spot.

Roma and Juventus are similarly dominant in Italy, sharing the last nine titles. Roma reclaimed *La Scudetto*, their third in four seasons, Inter split the pair to claim second, though third-placed Juve will also be in Europe.

Barca won the Spanish title with four games to play, well clear of Real Madrid and Real Sociedad, who both qualified for Europe.

Lyonnes' dominance in France led to the revival of post-season play-offs three years ago, but that had not stopped OL extending their record to 18 titles. Paris FC stood in their way this year with the final on May 29. PSG will also be in Europe.

Champions again...Bayern won another German title

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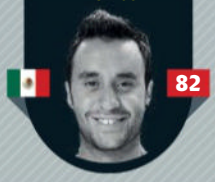

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Saudi Arabia

JOHN DUERDEN

Al Ahli end Machida Zelvia fairy tale

The Japanese underdogs' run to the AFC Champions League final on their competition debut was ended by the Saudi Arabian giants

The AFC Champions League Elite trophy stayed by the shores of the Red Sea as Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli successfully defended their title in April. The 1-0 victory over Machida Zelvia of Japan wasn't a great game but few of the near-60,000 fans inside Jeddah's King Abdullah Sports City Stadium cared.

With Ivan Toney, Riyad Mahrez, Franck Kessie and other stars, Al Ahli were strong favourites against a Machida outfit making their first appearance in the tournament. Not just that, but a team that had never been in the J. League's top tier before 2024 and have never won their domestic title. Direct, defensive and physical, the Tokyo club's strategy seemed to be to keep things tight until late in the game and perhaps snatch a goal on the counter or go all the way to penalties.

It all changed in the 68th minute when Zakaria Hawsawi headbutted Machida's Tete Yengi right in front of the referee. It was a shocking moment of madness and suddenly, the underdogs ventured forward. Former Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy was called into action by some fizzing long-range efforts, but held out until full-time.

Asian champions yet again...Al Ahli skipper Edouard Mendy lifts the AFC Champions League trophy

In extra-time, even with ten men, Al Ahli's quality eventually told. A Mahrez cross caused problems, Kessie laid it off, and there was Saudi Arabia international striker Firas Al Buraikan to fire home at the far post.

"We are really, really proud of what the team achieved this year. How every player was committed for that journey to win that trophy was unbelievable," said Al Ahli coach Matthias Jaissle. "I think this year was special because we needed to overcome many more obstacles along the way and how these guys were handling it was just on a really, really high level," he added.

It was one of those rare finals where everyone was content at the end – Machida really did seem just happy to be there.

"I think being the runner-up is a result to be proud of," said their coach Go Kuroda, who joined the club in 2022 after almost three decades as a high-school teacher. "It is only through these experiences that we can truly build up our experience as a club...I believe these things build up so that we must take this seriously and challenge ourselves to take the next step."

Flashpoint...the referee sends off Al Ahli defender Zakaria Hawsawi

Despite the general satisfaction, in truth it was not a tournament to remember – even without the US-Iran conflict that plunged the west of Asia into chaos. It meant that the round of 16 games in the region, which were set to take place over two legs in February, were moved back to April and became one-off affairs.

The major issue, however, is still that all of the games from the quarter-finals onwards took place in the Saudi Arabian city of Jeddah (and teams in the west played there from the last 16 onwards). This obviously gives Saudi teams – especially Al Ahli who played all four knockout games in front of their own supporters – a major advantage.

> "I think being the runner-up is a result to be proud of. It is only through these experiences that we can truly build up our experience as a club"
>
> Machida Zelvia head coach Go Kuroda

Advantage does not guarantee success, however. Al Hilal, record Asian Champions League winners with four titles, fell in the round of 16. After 120 minutes of action against Al Sadd ended 3-3, the Qataris, led by Roberto Mancini, triumphed in a penalty shootout to leave Simone Inzaghi to focus on the Saudi Pro League.

Al Ittihad, Jeddah rivals and the last team to win back-to-back Asian titles in 2004 and 2005, struggled all season and lost 1-0 to Machida in the quarters.

There was interest from Southeast Asia too with Johor Darul Ta'zim of Malaysia and Thailand's Buriram United making the last eight. United lost to Shabab Al Ahli of the United Arab Emirates after extra-time and Johor gave Al Ahli of Saudi Arabia a tough test before losing 2-1.

Al Sadd drew their next game 3-3 as well, but lost out to Vissel Kobe on penalties. It meant that Japan had two teams in the last four, but Kobe's narrow loss to Al Ahli meant that there was no all-Japanese final.

That was probably a good thing for the AFC as there would likely have been next to no fans in the stadium. For the semi-final between Machida and Shabab Al Ahli from Dubai, the attendance was just 395. To say it's not a good look for Asia's premier club tournament is an understatement.

It provoked criticism from the Japanese media especially and questions were asked – the main one being, what was wrong with playing knockout games home and away as had been the case for much of the tournament's history?

Such questions have not been answered and while the tournament will be remembered very fondly in Saudi Arabia, especially in Jeddah, for the rest of Asia – not so much.

Match-winner...Firas Al Buraikan is mobbed by his team-mates in extra-time

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Mamelodi Sundowns end long wait for African crown

After ten years of CAF Champions League disappointment, the South Africans have finally lifted the trophy again

The opposing coach described them as the best team on the continent over the last ten years and, while Egyptian giants Al Ahly might rightfully disagree, South Africa's Mamelodi Sundowns have certainly been a consistent force; consistent at qualifying for the group phase of the African Champions League – but also consistent at flopping at vital junctures.

That was all banished, however, as they ended a decade-long wait for their second CAF Champions League trophy, edging Royal Armed Forces of Morocco 2-1 on aggregate in the two-legged final to back up the bold statement by the military team's coach, Alexandre Santos.

The Pretoria-based club had been strong favourites last season but crashed to Pyramids of Egypt in the final. But this time, despite some calamitous defending at times, they proved too good for the rest of the pack.

Usually, Sundowns perform with conviction in the group phase and emerge as a hot pick for success only to then crash in the knockout stages. This season they flipped it round, starting with a mediocre group campaign before coming on strongly when it counted.

Beating Tunisia's Esperance 1-0 both home and away in the semi-final was hard fought, and the final had several twists and turns before the South Africans could lay their hands on the trophy.

Sundowns hosted the first leg in Pretoria and went ahead before half-time with a stinging left-footed free-kick from South Africa full-back Aubrey Modiba. They dominated the second half but wasted several good chances – the worst from new Colombian striker Brayan Leon, who was one-on-one with the goalkeeper but somehow managed to shank the ball wide.

Opening goal... Aubrey Modiba celebrates after scoring in the final first leg

The tenuous lead came back to haunt Sundowns seven days later in the return leg in Rabat, when Zimbabwe left-back Divine Lunga gave away a 40th-minute penalty after a clumsy foul. It looked a stonewall decision, but the young Somali referee, Omar Artan, waved play on only to overturn his original decision following a VAR review.

Mohamed Hrimat converted to level the aggregate score and take the already spine-tingling decibel level from the 60,000-strong crowd up a notch. But on the stroke of half-time, Sundowns equalised with a rasping half-volley from Teboho Mokoena that clipped the underside of the crossbar as it flew in.

With the away goals rule still in place in African club competition, it left the Moroccan hosts with a tough task. "We knew at that moment we had to score two more than them, and that's very difficult," admitted Santos.

Nevertheless, Sundowns' penchant for moments of folly continued. With some 15 minutes left on the clock, goalkeeper and captain Ronwen Williams spilt an innocuous shot and, as *Bafana Bafana's* No.1 scrambled to retrieve the ball, he rugby-tackled Youssef El Fahli. Again, the referee waved away home appeals, only to be called to the pitchside VAR monitor to overturn the decision.

> **The final had several twists and turns before the South Africans could lay their hands on the trophy**

Hrimat this time, however, had his effort saved as Williams made amends. With the wasted chance, so disappeared home hopes. The crowd made for the exits and by the time the final whistle blew the stadium was largely empty, echoing with screams of delight from the Sundowns contingent.

"Of course, had they scored that,

Review

Champions again... Mamelodi Sundowns players lift the trophy

it would be 15 minutes of suffering, for sure, because they would have come at us with everything," said Sundowns coach Miguel Cardoso, who bagged a winners' medal at the third time of asking after being runner-up in the two previous editions with Esperance in 2024 and Sundowns last year.

"After they missed the second penalty, the opponent lost their energy," added Cardoso. "We merited it because we were the best team, although it was tough."

His Portuguese compatriot Santos had steered Royal Armed Forces through an impressive campaign as they knocked out defending champions Pyramids and held off fellow Moroccans Renaissance Berkane in the semi-finals.

It was only the third time the Rabat-based club had participated in the group phase of the Champions League, although they have been African champions in the past, winning the old-style Champions Cup back in 1985.

A week before Sundowns' success, USM Alger won the CAF Confederation Cup following a dramatic penalty shootout against Zamalek of Egypt.

USMA triumphed 1-0 in the first leg of the final at home thanks to a bizarre finish. Zamalek thought they'd won after scoring in stoppage time – only for the VAR to review the build-up that led to the goal and find that USMA had a player fouled in the opposing box. Ahmed Khaldi tucked away the resultant spot-kick to completely turn the result on its head and help the Algerian side take a narrow lead to Cairo.

In the return leg, newly-crowned Egyptian champions Zamalek equalised with a penalty of their own in the fifth minute but could not find a second, and USMA, winners in 2023, eventually triumphed 8-7 on penalties.

Penalty specialist... Sundowns keeper Ronwen Williams

Oceania

STEVE MENARY

Auckland win inaugural OFC Pro League crown

Oceania's first-ever professional club competition gets off to a successful start

New Zealand's Auckland FC emerged as the winners of the Oceania Football Confederation's first professional competition, beating South Melbourne in the final of the OFC Pro League to complete a unique double.

The day after Auckland FC won their inaugural A-League title (more on page 84), their reserve side lifted another trophy at the city's Eden Park Stadium in front of 3,470 fans. Goals from Daniel Normann and Matt Ellis secured a 2-1 victory with Yuki Uchida scoring a consolation goal in stoppage time for South Melbourne.

The final completed a journey that began seven years ago when a taskforce was formed to determine the viability of a professional league in the region.

An anticipated kick-off in 2021 was always ambitious and the league was hit by multiple delays, some of which, notably the COVID-19 pandemic, were out of the OFC's hands. The two finalists were also ultimately under the auspices of the Asian Football Confederation; South Melbourne is a historic Australian side that plays in Victoria's National Premier League, while Auckland is a new club formed in 2024 by US multi-club ownership group the Black Knights that plays in Australia's A-League.

Despite the delays and dominance of clubs outside the Pacific islands that the league was primarily aimed

Inaugural winners... Auckland FC lift the OFC Pro League trophy *Credit: OFC Media via Phototek*

Match-winner... Auckland's Matt Ellis scores in the final *Credit: OFC Media via Phototek*

at encouraging, the tournament was greeted positively.

Samuel Garcia, head coach of Tahiti United, said: "The Pro League is a major development in our region. It's the best thing that could happen for raising the level of football in Oceania. I see only positive aspects to this new competition."

Other coaches felt the same. "The organisation is good, and I believe the league will have a positive impact on football here in the region," said Lars Hopp, the German coach of Vanuatu United, who proved the most successful of the Pacific clubs.

The tournament was played over a series of "circuits", kicking off in Auckland and Melbourne in January. Early attendances were small including a dismal 75 fans at Melbourne's Olympic Village to see Tahiti United play South Island United from New Zealand.

The biggest crowds were at Circuit 4 in the Solomon Islands, where football rather than rugby is the main sport. More than 9,000 fans watched the hosts, the Solomon Kings, draw 1-1 with South Melbourne.

Some glitches were to be expected, and the Video Assistant Referee proved cumbersome initially. "VAR has been a little too prominent to my taste with very long stoppages especially towards the end of [early] games but it's something we need to deal with," said Hopp. "We are all building the league together and all learning along the way."

Rob Sherman, the Welsh coach of New Zealand's other entrants, South Island United, agreed. "VAR was taking a bit too long to make a decision as you are standing around in the heat and you end up getting 10-15 minutes of extra time but the OFC took this on board and improved things," he said.

After the circuit stage, Auckland topped the table and qualified for a play-off group alongside second-placed South Melbourne, Fiji's Bula FC and South Island. Yet it was the Australians who won that, topping the four-team league with a 100% record.

The top three sides went directly to the semi-finals, while bottom-placed Bula contested a play-off with the winners of a challengers group comprised of the bottom half of the original table. That was won by Vanuatu United, who then saw off Bula to claim a last-four game with South Melbourne.

The two non-OFC sides went through to contest the final and players from the other sides dispersed until the league resumes next year.

A review of the first season is taking place, and some changes are expected based on feedback from clubs and coaches.

"OFC have worked very hard, but it could do with one or two modifications," added Sherman, who was previously manager of Fiji's national team. "Ten to 12 days away and three to four games is too much for some players. If they switched to two-game hubs, that would be only four to five days away.

"Also, Tahiti and ourselves were the only two clubs that didn't play at home, so we lost out on that."

South Island have already been promised to host a circuit in 2027 and expect to stage games in Christchurch and Dunedin. Other parts of the league structure that could be addressed include a decision to allow South Melbourne to use players from the NPL during the competition and potentially pushing the 2027 start back to February.

As Auckland FC take their place as Oceania's representatives at the 2026 FIFA Intercontinental Cup, the OFC will have six months to consider their options.

The final completed a journey that began seven years ago when a taskforce was formed to determine the viability of a professional league in the region

Supporters...South Melbourne fans inside Eden Park *Credit: OFC Media via Phototek*

South America

TIM VICKERY

5 Things...

...on the Copa Libertadores group stage

1 HAIL THE NEWCOMERS

Brazil have dominated the recent history of the Copa Libertadores, followed some way behind by Argentina, but this domination has not – until now – included Mirassol and Independiente Rivadavia. These teams, one from upstate Sao Paulo, the other from Argentina's wine-growing region of Mendoza, did wonderfully well simply to qualify for the Libertadores. And, making their debut in continental competitions, they played an excellent group phase and can dream of further progress.

Little Mirassol were the sensation of last year's Brazilian league but, after losing some key players, this season looked daunting – especially after an unkind Libertadores draw. But once again with splendid work by coach Rafael Guanaes, they were one of the first sides to book their place in the knockout stages – along with Independiente Rivadavia, who did it in an even more spectacular fashion.

Their first-ever international away game was in Rio's Maracana, against 2023 champions Fluminense, where they came away with a famous 2-1 win. Their attacking partnership comprising Colombian winger Sebastian Villa and Paraguayan centre-forward Alex Arce was one of the highlights of the group matches, with the latter notching two hat-tricks against Deportivo La Guaira.

Goal machine... Independiente Rivadavia's Alex Arce (R) couldn't stop scoring

2 UNDERDOGS CONTINUE TO PACK A PUNCH

The two countries which in recent times have most punched above their weight have been Ecuador and Paraguay, and, with some disappointments along the way, that has been the case again this year. Libertad of Paraguay were an unexpected disaster, and more was expected of Ecuador's Barcelona. But the three other representatives from these nations sailed through to the last 16.

Under the ever-fascinating Ariel Holan, Cerro Porteno of Paraguay came up with the outstanding result of the entire group phase when they came back from Brazil with a 1-0 win over Palmeiras. Last year's surprise semi-finalists, Liga of Quito (often referred to as LDU) are also safely through. And the other Ecuadorian side, Independiente del Valle, are well worth watching. Their youth development work has become legendary, with Borussia Dortmund-bound attacking midfielder Justin Lerma the latest exciting graduate.

Continuing to sparkle...Rosario Central winger Angel Di Maria

Independiente del Valle talent...Justin Lerma is the latest off the production line

The club have produced the bulk of the current Ecuador national side, but they also have a fine eye for veteran foreign talent. Colombian goalkeeper Aldair Quintana and Paraguay centre-forward Carlos Gonzalez put themselves in contention for international recalls on the back of displays in the Libertadores.

3 DI MARIA SHOWS ARGENTINA WHAT THEY'RE MISSING

While Quintana and Gonzalez ended the group phase dreaming of making it to the World Cup, Angel Di Maria turned his back on the prospect. The 38-year-old winger, so vital to all of Argentina's recent conquests, retired from international football after winning the 2024 Copa America. A triumphant return to Argentine football last year has made the domestic public very aware of what the national team is now missing.

Di Maria has been one of the true greats of the 21st century. He is that rare thing, a star without the star's ego, content so often during his long career to play second fiddle to both Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. But now, back at Rosario Central, his hometown club, he is the main attraction, and both the Argentine league and now the Libertadores are all the better for it. And after a fine group phase, Di Maria in the knockout rounds looks like a good antidote for any potential post-World Cup depression.

4 CHILEAN REVIVAL?

Might better times be on the way for Chile? After the passing of that golden generation, these have been difficult years for Chile's national side, and also for the club game. The country has not made any real recent impression on the Libertadores, only qualifying three teams to the knockout stages in the past 11 years. Youth development has also been disappointing, with Chile dismal hosts of last year's Under-20 World Cup.

There were encouraging signs earlier this year, then, when Santiago Wanderers won the Under-20 Libertadores title. And the senior competition has also been promising, with Coquimbo Unido, the shock 2025 league winners, playing a fine group phase, and Daniel Garnero's Universidad Catolica also coming out of the competition with great credit.

5 TRYING TO STYMIE THE BRAZILIAN DOMINATION

Can the Brazilian domination possibly be stopped? The financial chasm between Brazil and the rest of the continent is very unlikely to close. The big Brazilian clubs can assemble expensive multi-national squads with significantly more depth and quality than any of their Libertadores rivals.

The rest of the continent, then, can hardly hope to compete in an open fight. The logical course of action is for them to play on the counter-attack, to use time-wasting tactics to frustrate the Brazilians and draw them forward. Palmeiras, Fluminense and Cruzeiro all suffered unexpected home defeats in the group phase, showing that beating the Brazilians is not impossible. It could happen again in the knockout rounds. But if it does, it might be the result of a spectacle which is unlikely to please the purists.

Chilean revival...Coquimbo Unido made it through to the knockouts after cruising through their group

Mexico

MARTIN DEL PALACIO LANGER

Crazy Clausura ends with Cruz Azul crowned champions

The team from Mexico City overcome a mid-season collapse to claim a tenth league title and their first since 2021

Match winner ...Cruz Azul's Carlos Rotondi celebrates with the trophy

After five years of coming agonisingly close, Cruz Azul finally claimed their long-awaited tenth star in a Clausura 2026 that will go down as one of the most controversial tournaments in recent Mexican football history.

The *Celestes* secured the title under highly unusual circumstances. Considered one of the main contenders before the season began, the team gradually ran out of steam as the weeks went by. With three weeks left of the regular season, they had slipped from second to fifth place following a nine-game winless run.

The club then sacked head coach Nicolas Larcamon. His replacement, former Cruz Azul stalwart Joel Huiqui, had never managed in the top flight, so the outlook ahead of the play-offs looked uncertain.

Yet none of the other main title contenders had everything going in their favour either. For most of the regular season, the table had been led by Guadalajara who, under their Argentine manager Gabriel Milito, and built around a core of young Mexican players, had turned heads with some attractive football and strong results.

However, *Chivas'* success proved to be their undoing. Before the tournament, the Mexican FA had decided, with the agreement of all the clubs, that the play-offs would be played without players on international duty for *El Tri*, in order to allow manager Javier Aguirre to hold an extended camp ahead of the World Cup. The measure hit Guadalajara

Regular season high flyers...Guadalajara had a depleted squad for the play-offs

Exceptional...Pumas UNAM goalkeeper Keylor Navas displayed firm resistance in the final

hardest – five of their starting players left the squad just before the most important moment of the season, to the dismay of their huge fanbase, who strongly expressed their frustration on social networks, to no avail.

Meanwhile, the two clubs that had monopolised the title over the previous five seasons were also struggling to hit their stride. America had failed to successfully rebuild after three consecutive championship wins, and a bet on cheap Brazilian reinforcements simply didn't pay off.

Toluca, the reigning back-to-back champions, faced a dilemma that has become all too familiar for clubs in recent years. The decisive stages of the domestic league overlapped with the final rounds of the CONCACAF Champions Cup, with this edition carrying a berth for the 2029 Club World Cup. Forced to choose, *Los Diablos* prioritised the continental competition, sending a reserve side to the Clausura's closing stages.

> **The play-offs were tight throughout, and neither Cruz Azul nor Pumas reached the final having entirely convinced in the earlier stages**

That left Pumas UNAM as the only serious challengers to a title they hadn't won in 15 years. Built around players with genuine potential who had struggled to fulfil it elsewhere, the side led by former Mexico international Efrain Juarez had surprised the country with a fluid and effective brand of football that had carried them to the top of the table by the end of the regular season.

But a lack of experience in the big moments and a paper-thin bench would ultimately prove fatal.

The play-offs were tight throughout, and neither Cruz Azul nor Pumas reached the final having entirely convinced in the earlier stages. Cruz Azul eased past a weak Atlas side 3-2 in the quarter-finals and were then made to grind through a gruelling semi-final to eliminate a depleted *Chivas* 4-3 on aggregate, while Pumas advanced based on their league position after finishing level on aggregate with both America (6-6) and Pachuca (1-1).

Perhaps inevitably, the first leg of the final was a dull affair, with Pumas sitting deep and Cruz Azul attempting to attack without much conviction. A couple of sharp saves from the legendary Costa Rica goalkeeper Keylor Navas preserved the 0-0 scoreline, a result that seemed to hint at an open second leg.

After the first half of the return, Pumas looked to be on course for the title. They led 1-0 through a goal from Paraguay striker Robert Morales and were just 45 minutes from glory. But everything that could go wrong in the second half did. A freak own goal from defender Ruben Duarte levelled the score, and injuries to Duarte and Panama international Adalberto Carrasquilla left Pumas without two of their best players and a bench far below the standard expected of finalists.

Cruz Azul seized the moment, tilting the field in their favour, inspired by the outstanding play of their stars Carlos Rodriguez and Agustin Palavecino, time and again threatening Navas' goal.

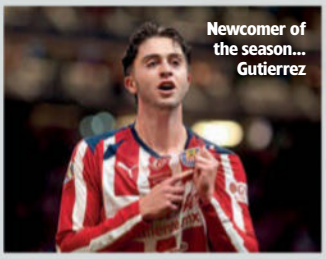
In the end, it was settled in added time. A needless foul by Uriel Antuna left Pumas with ten men in the 93rd minute, and two minutes later Carlos Rotondi struck the decisive goal that sealed the title for the *Celestes*.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Keylor Navas *(Pumas UNAM)*
The Costa Rica legend proved he still has it by propelling Pumas to an unlikely title challenge. Despite the defeat, he was spotless in the final, doing everything in his power to keep his team in it.

MANAGER OF THE SEASON
Efrain Juarez *(Pumas UNAM)*
The ex-Mexico international took charge in March, only his second head coach role. His no-nonsense style and personality turned Pumas into unlikely title contenders.

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Brian Gutierrez *(Guadalajara)*
Arriving from MLS, the US-born midfielder showed enough flashes of brilliance for *Chivas* to earn a surprise call-up for Mexico's 2026 World Cup squad.



Newcomer of the season... Gutierrez

Australia

MIKE TUCKERMAN

Review

Auckland FC win A-League to complete unique double

The New Zealanders seal their first-ever A-League title, a day after their second string claimed the inaugural OFC Pro League crown

The champions of Australia are a team from New Zealand, after Auckland FC downed Sydney FC to claim a maiden A-League championship in an unexpected title decider.

The Kiwi side did it the hard way, battling their way through the play-offs to host a grand final that pitted the third-placed finishers against the fifth.

Midfielder Cam Howieson scored the only goal of a scrappy decider, driving home via the aid of a deflection to spark frenzied celebrations among the sell-out crowd of 28,374 at Go Media Stadium.

The 31-year-old only started due to injuries to fellow midfielders Felipe Gallegos and Jake Brimmer, but the man who spent seven years playing amateur football with Auckland City picked the perfect moment to score his first A-League goal.

Howieson claimed the Joe Marston Medal as man of the match, while the win ensured redemption for Auckland coach Steve Corica, who finished top of the table in the club's inaugural season last year only to go out in the semi-finals.

The same fate befell the Newcastle Jets this time around, after the Novocastrians finished five points clear of second-placed Adelaide United. Mark Milligan's side dominated the regular season but crashed out on penalties to Sydney FC, despite Eli Adams' dramatic stoppage-time equaliser in the second leg of their semi-final.

A play-off exit was harsh on a Newcastle side that played the most entertaining brand of football, with the likes of Adams, Clayton Taylor, Daniel Wilmering and a resurgent Max Burgess all enjoying superb campaigns.

Sydney FC's season was saved by

Decisive... Cam Howieson celebrates scoring in the final

Patrick Kisnorbo, who took over as coach with four games remaining and promptly led the Sky Blues to the grand final. Kisnorbo is not universally loved by Sydney supporters – mainly because he previously coached Melbourne City and Melbourne Victory – but the former Socceroos defender has already penned a new three-year deal to remain in the Harbour City.

The win ensured redemption for Auckland coach Steve Corica, who finished top of the table in the club's inaugural season last year only to go out in the semi-finals

Adelaide United stunned many to finish second on a heart-stopping final day. But Reds coach Airton Andrioli will rue top scorer Luka Jovanovic's late red card for removing his shirt to celebrate his last-minute winner, with the Australia Under-23 international then missing the first leg of their semi-final defeat to Auckland through suspension.

Melbourne Victory head coach Arthur Diles paid the price for his side's elimination-finals defeat to bitter rivals Sydney FC, with Diles informed at the end of the season that his services were no longer required. That was despite the efforts of Spaniard Juan Mata, with the 38-year-old looking a cut above his team-mates as he was named the competition's Player of the Season.

Melbourne City will also be severely disappointed to have gone out on penalties to Auckland in their elimination-final, even if coach Aurelio Vidmar did well to drag his youthful side into the play-offs. City spent much of the campaign battling on dual fronts, with Vidmar's side becoming the first Australian outfit to reach the knockout stages of the AFC Champions League Elite since 2020.

Six defeats in the final nine games cost Macarthur a shot at finals football, with Bulls coach Mile Sterjovski under pressure after missing the play-offs in back-to-back campaigns.

Fans of Wellington Phoenix have watched on in dismay as Auckland have become the dominant force in New Zealand football, and their coach Giancarlo Italiano resigned after a sixth successive Kiwi derby defeat. Interim coach Chris Greenacre was unable to steer his side into the finals but has already been named as the new head coach.

Twice championship winners in recent seasons, the cash-strapped Central Coast Mariners did well to recover from coach Mark Jackson resigning a week before the season kicked off. Warren Moon made the Gosford outfit more competitive than many predicted, but the ex-Brisbane Roar coach has already confirmed he won't be at the helm next season.

A disastrous pre-season resulted in Perth Glory sacking coach David Zdrilic just two games into the new campaign, with the charismatic Adam Griffiths taking over in the west. His press conferences were better than the results, going viral back in December for a bizarre analogy about mountain goats and lions.

Brisbane Roar coach Michael Valkanis also made headlines with his "anytime, anywhere, anyone" mantra, but after winning five of their opening ten games, the Queensland club won just once more in 2026 to finish second from bottom.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Juan Mata *(Melbourne Victory)*
Discarded by Western Sydney Wanderers, the former Spain world and European champion made it clear he meant business with a sparkling campaign that saw him finish with the most assists and chances created.

Player of the Year... Juan Mata

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Paul Okon-Engstler *(Sydney FC)*
The Belgium-born son of former Socceroos midfielder Paul Okon, Okon-Engstler immediately looked the part with a series of dominant displays in Sydney FC's midfield. Combined superb vision with an unrelenting grit.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Mark Milligan *(Newcastle Jets)*
So dominant was Milligan's first season in charge, he has already been touted as a future Socceroos coach. Transformed the Jets from an average mid-table side into the league's biggest entertainers.

A disastrous season had dramatic repercussions at Western Sydney Wanderers. Ex-Sydney FC coach Ufuk Talay will cross the city divide to take charge next season, after Alen Stajcic was sacked and interim coach Gary van Egmond opted to move on at the end of campaign that saw the Wanderers finish bottom for the first time in their history.

Table toppers...Newcastle Jets dominated the regular season but couldn't secure the title in the play-offs

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

5 Things...

...from Asian football

The wait is over ...Ronaldo lifts the Saudi Pro League trophy

1 RONALDO AND AL NASSR FINALLY CELEBRATE A TITLE

The Saudi Pro League title race went right down to the final day, a scenario that had looked unlikely nine days earlier. Al Nassr were leading 1-0 against their closest rivals Al Hilal in their penultimate game and were seconds away from securing the title when goalkeeper Bento came to catch a 98th minute throw-in and spilled it into his own net. A loss against Gamba Osaka of Japan four days later in the AFC Champions League Two final heightened nerves and worries that Nassr were going to blow it.

But a home clash with strugglers Damac in the last game gave them a second chance to get their hands on the trophy and they duly took it. Speedy wide attackers Sadio Mane and Kingsley Coman, two of the team's most consistent performers throughout the campaign, put the Yellows ahead and although the visitors pulled a goal back to add some more tension, skipper Cristiano Ronaldo settled the nerves. Two goals, number 27 and 28 of the season, kickstarted the party. Much has been said about the fact that the 41-year-old had not won a major trophy in Saudi Arabia since signing for the Riyadh club in December 2022, but that mini-drought has now ended.

Nervy wait...a late draw with Al Hilal amost cost Ronaldo and Co.

2 MINI INDIAN CAMPAIGN HAS A THRILLING FINISH

The 2025-26 Indian Super League season was due to start in September but due to off-pitch issues (basically, the All India Football Federation could not find a new commercial partner), kick-off didn't take place until February. It meant that there were just 13 games to be played by the 14 teams. In terms of football, it may have been short but it was very sweet as, going into the final day, no fewer than five teams were still in with a chance of winning the title.

In the end, it was East Bengal who triumphed, coming from behind to beat Inter Kashi, a first-ever ISL win for the Kolkata giants and a first league title since 2004. City rivals and defending champions Mohun Bagan finished level on points but could not overcome their goal difference deficit, while Mumbai City, champions in 2023 and now no longer under the City Football Group umbrella, finished third.

There are still lots of issues in the league going into next season, but at least there was some fine football to enjoy.

More final-day drama...Al Sadd head coach Roberto Mancini celebrated a title triumph in Qatar

3 THAILAND AND TAJIKISTAN SECURE THE FINAL 2027 ASIAN CUP SPOTS...ALMOST

The draw for the 2027 Asian Cup took place in May in Riyadh and while for many of the coaches in attendance the focus was on the World Cup, others were delighted to be there.

In the final round of qualification on the final day of March, Thailand booked their place by defeating Turkmenistan in Bangkok in a tense game that was only won in the 89th minute. Tajikistan, who reached the last eight in their debut appearance last time, drew 1-1 with the Philippines to book their return.

At the time of writing, there was still one of the 24 spots yet to be filled. Lebanon's match with Yemen was moved to Qatar, but the conflict in the region that started with the US-Iran war led to the game being postponed to June.

See page 90 for the qualifying results, standings and group stage draw.

4 LAST-DAY DRAMA IN QATAR LEAVES MANCINI SMILING

Roberto Mancini knows all about last-day drama having led Manchester City to their first English Premier League title, but there was more at the end of April when his Al Sadd team met Al Shamal with just two points separating the top two in the Qatar Stars League. The former had won 18 league titles, the latter was looking for a first.

The Italian had actually already celebrated the championship win a week earlier when Al Sadd took an insurmountable lead at the top. But then Shamal's loss to Qatar SC, who had brought on a substitute that took the team over the permitted number of foreign players on the pitch, was overturned to set up quite the final-day showdown.

Just as he did with City on that famous day against QPR in 2012, Mancini led his side to a 3-2 victory, with former Liverpool forward Roberto Firmino among the goalscorers.

5 CHINA'S YOUTH GIVE MORE CAUSE FOR OPTIMISM

The headlines around Chinese football have been grim for some time, and it did not come as a surprise when the national team got nowhere near qualifying for this summer's World Cup in North America, even despite its expansion. But then in January, their Under-23 team reached the final of the 2026 Asian Cup before losing to Japan, and in May the Under-17s did the same. Victories over Qatar (2-0), Saudi Arabia (3-1) and Australia (2-0) took them to another showdown with the Japanese, only to fall at the same hurdle and lose 3-2.

There is no disgrace in that as Japan have been the best for quite some time, but these are encouraging signs that the investments made in youth development in Chinese football in the last decade are finally starting to show some return.

Bright future...China Under-17s midfielder Xie Jin scored a late goal v Australia in the semi-finals

Sint Maarten

STEVE MENARY

Sint Maarten chasing FIFA membership

The Dutch Caribbean islanders have had their knockbacks, but believe they could become the next country to join the world game

Chasing FIFA membership ...Sint Maarten players during the CONCACAF Series in March

The finals of the FIFA World Cup are getting remorselessly bigger but the number of members at the game's global governing bodies has not changed in a decade.

There will be 48 teams at this summer's edition, and a plan has been mooted to expand the number of finalists at the next edition in 2030 to 64. If approved, the World Cup will have doubled in size in just eight years and feature more than 30% of FIFA's 211 members.

In contrast, the two newest FIFA members – Gibraltar and Kosovo – were begrudgingly admitted in 2016 only after legal challenges.

An attempt by the Sint Maarten Football Federation (SXMFF) has faced similar struggles.

The federation, which is responsible for football on the Dutch-speaking side of the Caribbean island – which is split along colonial lines, with the Dutch territory in the south and the French collective of Saint Martin in the north – was formed in 1985 and became an associate member of CONCACAF in 2002, but football development withered.

The league folded in 2011. However, then-CONCACAF president Jeffrey Webb made Sint Maarten a full CONCACAF member in 2013 despite little evidence of football even being played there.

> **Football has been revived on the island and interest was expressed in joining FIFA**

In 2015, Sudesh Singh was elected SXMFF president, and since then football has been revived on the island, particularly since the creation of the CONCACAF Nations League in 2019, which has helped revitalise the side at representative level. Interest was expressed in joining FIFA but was subsequently rejected due to the island's political status.

Any new FIFA member must be a full member of a regional confederation for two years and be recognised as an independent country by the United Nations, and Sint Maarten falls short of that requirement; since the dissolution of the old Netherlands Antilles in 2010, it has been an autonomous constituent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Bonaire, another Dutch-speaking Caribbean island also formerly part of the Antilles, was also rejected in 2019 by FIFA, whose decision was supported by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) on the grounds of the island's ties with the Netherlands. Bonaire's status is slightly different from Sint Maarten – it is a special municipality within the Kingdom of the Netherlands – and the SXMFF hoped for a different outcome with a new application, but FIFA's criteria had been tightened.

After rejection, Sint Maarten also resorted to CAS, with hearings held in April 2022. A CAS spokesperson said: "A decision was rendered for the arbitration between Sint Maarten Football Federation v [FIFA] on 28 March 2023. Both Parties agreed that the Award should remain confidential, which is why it has not been published on the CAS jurisprudence database. It is the responsibility of individual sporting federations to implement CAS rulings."

FIFA didn't respond to *World Soccer's* request for a comment, but Singh, who is still the SXMFF president, says: "FIFA appointed the membership committee. [The] application will have to be reviewed by them...[they] should publish very soon."

The details of the CAS judgement remain secret, but one theory proposed by insiders is that FIFA must consider Sint Maarten's first application on the criteria that was in place at the time, which was before the introduction of the United Nations rule.

The British overseas territory of Gibraltar gained entry to UEFA and FIFA on similar grounds and if that is the case, Sint Maarten could be well placed for entry to the global game.

Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond

Swiss champions... Leonardo Bertone of FC Thun celebrates

PROMOTED FC THUN'S FAIRY-TALE SWISS TITLE

It has been a remarkable season across Europe with many title winners that nobody saw coming. LASK lifted the Austrian Bundesliga for the first time in six decades and Gyor ran out victorious across the border in Hungary, while Sabah came top of the pile in Azerbaijan. But arguably the biggest headline was written by FC Thun, who won the Swiss Super League as a promoted club and claimed the first major trophy in their 128-year history.

They are the first promoted team to become champions of Switzerland since Grasshoppers in 1952, though it has happened plenty of times across Europe since then. Otto Rehhagel's Bundesliga triumph with Kaiserslautern in 1998 will probably spring to mind first for most European football aficionados, but the most recent example in UEFA was ML Vitebsk, who won the Belarusian title last year. Before that it had not been done since Ararat-Armenia in 2019, who went from being founded in 2017 to national champions within two years.

Under a decade earlier, there were two more remarkable examples in Eastern Europe. With the backing of pharmaceuticals entrepreneur Kiril Domuschiev, Ludogorets gained back-to-back promotions in Bulgaria and immediately won the Parva Liga in 2012 – the first of 14 consecutive titles in a run that equalled the European record and was only ended this spring by Levski Sofia. In 2011, Shkendija won the title in North Macedonia as a promoted club. In that same season, Vardar were relegated – but bought the licence of promoted Miravci and stayed up. They then became Macedonian champions the following season in 2012.

Don't miss next month's European season review issue for a full eyewitness report on FC Thun's remarkable Swiss Super League triumph

EXILED AL HILAL'S AFRICAN ADVENTURE

There are a handful of football clubs that play in the league of another country. Auckland FC and Wellington Phoenix of New Zealand compete in Australia's A-League, while Liechtenstein-based FC Vaduz ply their trade in Switzerland's Super League. Rarer still are clubs who have won the title abroad, such as Rapid Vienna in wartime Germany and Monaco in France. But there is only one club on the planet with titles in two foreign countries: Al Hilal of Sudan. And what's more, they have won them both – plus the title in their own country – in the past 12 months.

With a brutal conflict raging in their homeland since 2023 and rendering normal competition impossible, Sudanese giants Al Hilal and Al Merrikh – both from the city of Omdurman – joined Mauritania's Super D1 as guests for the 2024-25 season. Despite being based 5,000km away on the other side of Africa and unable to see their families due to the war, Al Hilal finished top of the table and were awarded the title of honorary champions. They followed that up by winning a shortened tournament on home soil last summer, which was held to determine the spots in CAF competitions.

Once that had concluded, Sudan's leading clubs again explored the possibility of competing in another country and settled on Rwanda – though the Premier League season was already a month old by the time their move was rubber-stamped by the powers-that-be. And yet despite that fixture backlog, the loss of their influential coach Florent Ibenge and almost an entirely new squad, Al Hilal have once again sealed the title and completed a remarkable three-peat that is unlikely to ever happen again.

But with the Sudanese conflict continuing to rage, perhaps there are more chapters in this overseas odyssey still to be written. There is already talk of a move to another country next season, with Algeria, South Africa and Tanzania mooted as possible destinations.

BURSASPOR'S TURKISH FOOTBALL TICK LIST

As one of only two non-Istanbul clubs to have won the Super Lig title – alongside seven-time champions Trabzonspor – Bursaspor's name is etched into Turkish football history. They claimed the title in 2010 and competed in the following season of the UEFA Champions League, where they made headlines for their decision not to don their Celtic-resembling green kit when they faced Rangers at Ibrox to avoid antagonising Scottish fans. More recent times have, however, been less kind to the club, who dropped down to Turkey's fourth tier in 2024.

But even at their nadir, Bursaspor continued to pack out their 43,000-capacity Centennial Ataturk Stadium – a venue renowned the world over for its unique crocodile-shaped design. And those loyal fans now have a reason to smile again, having seen their team achieve back-to-back promotions and win the third tier this season. That title triumph also saw Bursaspor "complete" Turkish football: they became the first club in the country to win each of the top four tiers from the 3. Lig up to the Super Lig.

When season tickets went on sale for next season, they reportedly sold out in under ten minutes. And who knows? Twelve months from now, the Bursaspor faithful might be celebrating a top-flight return and dreaming of more magical European nights in the years to come.

Long suffering...Bursaspor fans are now smiling once again

Listen to the sweeper PODCAST
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Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

European play-offs

Path A

Mar 26 – Cardiff
Wales 1 (D. James 51)
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Dzeko 86)
After Extra-Time; Bosnia & Herz. win 4-2 on pens

Mar 26 – Bergamo
Italy 2 (Tonali 56, Kean 80)
Northern Ireland 0

Mar 31 – Zenica
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Tabakovic 79)
Italy 1 (Kean 15)
After Extra-Time; Bosnia & Herz. win 4-1 on pens

Path B

Mar 26 – Valencia
Ukraine 1 (Ponomarenko 90)
Sweden 3 (Gyokeres 6, 51, 73 pen)

Mar 26 – Warsaw
Poland 2 (Lewandowski 63, Zielinski 73)
Albania 1 (Hoxha 42)

Mar 31 – Stockholm
Sweden 3 (Elanga 20, Lagerbielke 44, Gyokeres 88)
Poland 2 (Zalewski 33, Swiderski 55)

Path C

Mar 26 – Istanbul
Turkey 1 (Kadioglu 53)
Romania 0

Mar 26 – Bratislava
Slovakia 3 (Valjent 6, Haraslin 45, Strelec 90+4)
Kosovo 4 (Hodza 21, Asllani 47, Muslija 60, Hajrizi 72)

Mar 31 – Pristina
Kosovo 0
Turkey 1 (Akturkoglu 53)

Path D

Mar 26 – Copenhagen
Denmark 4 (Damsgaard 49, Isaksen 58, 59, Norgaard 75)
North Macedonia 0

Mar 26 – Prague
Czech Republic 2 (Schick 27 pen, Krejci 86)
Rep of Ireland 2 (Parrott 19 pen, Kovar 23 og)
After Extra-Time; Czech Republic win 4-3 on pens

Mar 31 – Prague
Czech Republic 2 (Sulc 3, Krejci 100)
Denmark 2 (Andersen 72, Hogh 111)
After Extra-Time; Czech Republic win 3-1 on pens

Inter-Confederation Play-Offs

Path 1

Mar 26 – Guadalajara
New Caledonia 0
Jamaica 1 (Cadamarteri 18)

Mar 31 – Guadalajara
DR Congo 1 (Tuanzebe 100)
Jamaica 0
After Extra-Time

Path 2

Mar 26 – Monterrey
Bolivia 2 (Paniagua 72, Terceros 79 pen)
Suriname 1 (Van Gelderen 48)

Mar 31 – Monterrey
Iraq 2 (Al Hamadi 10, Hussein 53)
Bolivia 1 (Paniagua 38)

2024-25 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

League C-D Promotion-Relegation Play-Offs

Mar 26:
Gibraltar 0-1 Latvia; Malta 0-2 Luxembourg
Mar 31: Latvia 1-0 Gibraltar (agg 2-0); Luxembourg 3-0 Malta (agg 5-0)

2027 AFCON

Preliminary Qualifying Round

Mar 25-27: Eritrea 2-0 Eswatini; Djibouti 0-4 South Sudan; Seychelles 0-0 Lesotho; Chad 0-4 Burundi; Somalia 0-0 Mauritius; Sao Tome & Principe 0-3 Ethiopia
Mar 29-31: South Sudan 0-1 Djibouti (agg 4-1); Lesotho 2-1 Seychelles (agg 2-1); Burundi 4-0 Chad (agg 8-0); Mauritius 0-0 Somalia (agg 0-0, *Somalia win 4-2 on pens*); Eswatini 1-2 Eritrea (agg 1-4); Ethiopia 1-0 Sao Tome & P. (agg 4-0)

Group Stage Draw

Group A
Morocco, Gabon, Niger, Lesotho

Group B
Egypt, Angola, Malawi, South Sudan

Group C
Ivory Coast, Ghana, Gambia, Somalia

Group D
South Africa, Guinea, Kenya, Eritrea

Group E
DR Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe

Group F
Burkina Faso, Benin, Mauritania, Central African Republic

Group G
Cameroon, Comoros, Namibia, Congo

Group H
Tunisia, Uganda, Libya, Botswana

Group I
Algeria, Zambia, Togo, Burundi

Group J
Senegal, Mozambique, Sudan, Ethiopia

Group K
Mali, Cape Verde, Rwanda, Liberia

Group L
Nigeria, Madagascar, Tanzania, Guinea-Bissau

• *Qualifying takes place Sept. 2026-March 2027*

2027 ASIAN CUP

Third Round Qualifying

Group A

Mar 31 – Hisor
Tajikistan 1 (Boboev 41)
Philippines 1 (Obermair 19)

Mar 31 – Male
Maldives 2 (Irufaan 89, Fasir 90+4 pen)
Timor-Leste 1 (Bajhito 67)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tajikistan (Q)	6	4	2	0	14	3	14
Philippines	6	4	2	0	16	6	14
Maldives	6	1	0	5	3	13	3
Timor-Leste	6	1	0	5	4	15	3

Group B

Mar 31 – Guwahati
Bhutan 2 (Gyeltshen 39, 45+1)
Brunei 1 (Yazid 29)

Lebanon v Yemen
Match rescheduled for June 4

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lebanon*	5	4	1	0	14	0	13
Yemen*	5	3	2	0	18	1	11
Bhutan	6	1	1	4	4	16	4
Brunei	6	1	0	5	3	22	3

**Qualifier still to be decided*

Group C

Mar 31 – Kochi
India 2 (Williams 4, Mishra 50)
Hong Kong 1 (Camargo 65)

Mar 31 – Kallang
Singapore 1 (H. Stewart 31)
Bangladesh 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Singapore (Q)	6	4	2	0	8	4	14
Hong Kong	6	2	2	2	8	8	8
Bangladesh	6	1	2	3	6	8	5
India	6	1	2	3	4	6	5

Group D

Mar 31 – Bangkok
Thailand 2 (Suphanan 14, Bihr 89)
Turkmenistan 1 (Caryyew 60)

Mar 31 – Taipei
Chinese Taipei 1 (Yu Yao-hsing 55)
Sri Lanka 3 (Suresh 18, Senthurvasan 26, Tiao 53 og)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Thailand (Q)	6	5	0	1	16	5	15
Turkmenistan	6	4	0	2	11	7	12
Sri Lanka	6	3	0	3	8	9	9
Chinese Taipei	6	0	0	6	5	19	0

Group E

Mar 31 – Jeddah
Syria 5 (Al Salkhadi 5, Al Hallaq 54, Al Mustafa 58, 82, Al Aswad 90+1)
Afghanistan 1 (Panahi 23)

Mar 31 – Islamabad
Pakistan 1 (Shayak 90)
Myanmar 2 (Saqib 46 og, Than Paing 59)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Syria (Q)	6	6	0	0	21	2	18
Myanmar	6	4	0	2	8	11	12
Afghanistan	6	0	2	4	4	11	2
Pakistan	6	0	2	4	2	11	2

Group F

Mar 31 – Ninh Binh
Vietnam 3 (Do Duy Manh 6, Nguyen Xuan Son 51, 59)
Malaysia 1 (Endrick 77 pen)

Mar 31 – Vientiane
Nepal 0
Laos 1 (Bounphachan 48)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vietnam (Q)	6	6	0	0	17	2	18
Malaysia	6	3	0	3	10	10	9
Laos	6	2	0	4	4	16	6
Nepal	6	1	0	5	5	8	3

Group Stage Draw

Group A
Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Palestine

Group B
Uzbekistan, Bahrain, North Korea, Jordan

Group C
Iran, Syria, Kyrgyzstan, China

Group D
Australia, Tajikistan, Iraq, Singapore

Group E
South Korea, United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, Lebanon/Yemen

Group F
Japan, Qatar, Thailand, Indonesia

• *Tournament takes place Jan. 7-Feb. 5, 2027*

FRIENDLIES

Mar 15 – Santa Cruz
Bolivia 3 (Haquin 23, Godoy 38, Nava 51)
Trinidad & Tobago 0

Mar 25 – Astana
Kazakhstan 2 (Vorogovskiy 12, Kasym 79)
Namibia 0

Mar 25 – Guadalajara
Bermuda 0
DR Congo 2 (Mayele 45, Wissa 51 pen)

Mar 26 – Kigali
Tanzania 0
Liechtenstein 1 (Saglam 55)

Mar 26 – Boston
Brazil 1 (Bremer 78)
France 2 (Mbappe 32, Ekitike 65)

Mar 26 – Orlando
Colombia 1 (J. Arias 2)
Croatia 2 (Vuskovic 6, Matanovic 42)

Mar 26 – Bayamon
Puerto Rico 4 (W. Rivera 52, 61, R. Rivera 57, Antonetti 76 pen)
Guam 0

Mar 26 – Kigali
Aruba 4 (Fermina 5, Romano 13, 16, Van Kilsdonk 66)
Macau 1 (Leong Ka Hang 88)

Mar 26 – Chisinau
Moldova 0
Lithuania 2 (Revenco 33 og, Gineitis 71)

Mar 26 – Nicosia
Cyprus 0
Belarus 1 (Tikhomirov 25)

Mar 26 – Tbilisi
Georgia 2 (Kvaratskhelia 36, 54)
Israel 2 (Mizrahi 60, Gandelman 64)

Mar 26 – George Town
Bahamas 1 (Holcombe 15)
Anguilla 3 (Tesselaar 43, 52 pen, Guishard 83)

Mar 27 – Auckland
Chile 4 (Brereton Diaz 16, Gutierrez 58, Loyola 67, Tapia 79)
Cape Verde 2 (Livramento 21, S. Cabral 45+3)

Mar 27 – Sydney
China 2 (Wei Shihao 45+2, Zhang Yuning 59)
Curacao 0

Mar 27 – Auckland
New Zealand 0
Finland 2 (Pohjanpalo 25, Oksanen 85)

Mar 27 – Jakarta
Solomon Islands 2 (Lea'i 29 pen, 70)
Bulgaria 10 (M. Petkov 5, 45+2, Yordanov 13 pen, Krastev 39, 44, Nikolov 53, 81, 90+3, Rusev 63 pen, Balov 65)

Mar 27 – Sydney
Australia 1 (Bos 85)
Cameroon 0

Mar 27 – Tashkent
Venezuela 4 (Alfonzo 60, 67, Rondon 81, 85)
Trinidad & Tobago 1 (Moore 52)

Mar 27 – Antalya
Iran 1 (Taremi 67)
Nigeria 2 (Simon 6, Adams 51)

Mar 27 – Jakarta
Indonesia 4 (Putra 15, 25, Romeny 53, Zijlstra 75)
St Kitts & Nevis 0

Mar 27 – Kigali
Kenya 1 (Ogam 51)
Estonia 1 (Tammik 21)
Estonia win 5-4 on pens

Mar 27 – Krasnodar
Russia 3 (Sadulaev 3, Tyukavin 45+3 pen, Golovin 83)
Nicaragua 1 (Acevedo 16)

Mar 27 – Vienna
Austria 5 (Sabitzer 12 pen, Gregoritsch 51, Posch 59, Chukwuemeka 79, Seiwald 90+2)
Ghana 1 (J. Ayew 77)

Mar 27 – Durban
South Africa 1 (Appollis 48)
Panama 1 (Barcenas 23)

Mar 27 – Antalya
Jordan 2 (Faisal 50 pen, Sabra 76)
Costa Rica 2 (Alcocer 84, Madrigal 90+1)

Mar 27 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 0
Egypt 4 (Issa 4, Trezeguet 16, Zizo 44, Marmoush 56)

Mar 27 – Piraeus
Greece 0
Paraguay 1 (D. Gomez 52)

Mar 27 – Genoa
Algeria 7 (Gouiri 19, 60, Mahrez 31 pen, Abada 45+1, Aouar 47, Ghedjemis 76, Benbouali 82)
Guatemala 0

Mar 27 – Wembley
England 1 (White 81)
Uruguay 1 (Valverde 90+4 pen)

Mar 27 – Amsterdam
Netherlands 2 (Van Dijk 35, Reijnders 51)
Norway 1 (Schjelderup 24)

Mar 27 – Basel
Switzerland 3 (Ndoye 17, Embolo 41, Monteiro 79)
Germany 4 (Tah 26, Gnabry 45+2, Wirtz 61, 85)

Mar 27 – Villarreal
Spain 3 (Oyarzabal 16, 43, Munoz 72)
Serbia 0

Mar 27 – Madrid
Morocco 1 (El Aynaoui 88)
Ecuador 1 (Yeboah 48)

Mar 27 – Buenos Aires
Argentina 2 (Fernandez 17, Paz 32)
Mauritania 1 (Lefort 90+4)

Mar 27 – Santiago de los Caballeros
Dominican Rep 2 (Firpo 15, Romero 90+4 pen)
El Salvador 2 (Ordaz 62, 78)

Mar 27 – Sumgayit
Azerbaijan 6 (Mahmudov 2 pen, Sadykhov 21, Qurbanli 37, Bayramov 64, Isgandarli 86, Akhmedzade 89)
Saint Lucia 1 (Phillip 52 pen)

Mar 27 – Podgorica
Montenegro 2 (Mugosa 41 pen, Osmajic 80)
Andorra 0

Mar 27 – Santiago de los Caballeros
Guyana 2 (De Rosario 28, 31)
Dominica 0

Mar 28 – Francistown
Zambia 0
Malawi 0
Zambia win 9-8 on pens

Mar 28 – Milton Keynes
South Korea 0
Ivory Coast 4 (Guessand 35, Adingra 45+1, Godo 62, Singo 90+3)

Mar 28 – Saint-Denis
Senegal 2 (Jackson 41, I. Sarr 54)
Peru 0

Mar 28 – Toronto
Canada 2 (J. David 67 pen, 75 pen)
Iceland 2 (Oskarsson 9, 21)

Mar 28 – Budapest
Hungary 1 (Schon 79)
Slovenia 0

Mar 28 – Glasgow
Scotland 0
Japan 1 (J. Ito 84)

Mar 28 – Atlanta
United States 2 (McKennie 39, Agyemang 87)
Belgium 5 (Debast 45, Onana 53, De Ketelaere 59 pen, Lukebakio 68, 82)

Mar 28 – Serravalle
San Marino 1 (Giacopetti 22)
Faroe Islands 2 (Andreasen 45+1, Frederiksberg 64)

Mar 29 – Toronto
Haiti 0
Tunisia 1 (Tounekti 7)

Mar 29 – Mexico City
Mexico 0
Portugal 0

Mar 29 – Kigali
Macau 0
Tanzania 6 (Amancio 16 og, Mwamnyeto 26, Yahya 45, Peter 56, Miroshi 74, Allarakhia 87)

Mar 29 – Maryland
Colombia 1 (Campaz 77)
France 3 (Doue 29, 56, Thuram 41)

Mar 29 – Bayamon
Puerto Rico 2 (De Leon 19 pen, Shaffer 44 og)
US Virgin Islands 0

Mar 29 – Kaunas
Lithuania 0
Georgia 2 (Mikautadze 70 pen, 84)

Mar 29 – Yerevan
Armenia 1 (Bichakhchyan 88 pen)
Belarus 2 (Yablonskiy 8, Tiknizyan 72 og)

Mar 29 – Kigali
Aruba 4 (Romano 18, Robertha 25, Breinburg 69, Hofer 90+4 og)
Liechtenstein 1 (Zund 52)

Mar 29 – Rincon
Barbados 2 (Banton 51, Oughterson 59)
St Vincent & Grenadines 3 (Franklyn 28, Solomon 38, Anderson 78)

Mar 29 – Santiago de los Caballeros
Dominican Republic 1 (Romero 53)
Cuba 1 (Reyes 51)

Mar 30 – Auckland
Cape Verde 1 (Pires 67)
Finland 1 (Skytta 45+4)

Mar 30 – Auckland
New Zealand 4 (Barbarouses 31, Just 40, Randall 60, Waine 71)
Chile 1 (Tapia 83)

Mar 30 – Jakarta
Indonesia 0
Bulgaria 1 (M. Petkov 38 pen)

Mar 30 – Kigali
Grenada 0
Kenya 3 (Odhiambo 13, Ogam 18, Valcin 81 og)

Mar 30 – Tashkent
Uzbekistan 0
Venezuela 0
Uzbekistan win 5-4 on pens

Mar 30 – Stuttgart
Germany 2 (Havertz 45+3 pen, Undav 88)
Ghana 1 (Fatawu 71)

Mar 30 – George Town
Cayman Island 1 (Charles 60 og)
Bahamas 0

Mar 30 – Tashkent
Gabon 2 (Kanga 33, Essang-Matouti 54)
Trinidad & Tobago 2 (Garcia 53, 90)

Mar 30 – Sumgayit
Azerbaijan 1 (Mammadov 72)
Sierra Leone 1 (Kanu 28)

Mar 30 – Nicosia
Cyprus 3 (Kastanos 5, Charalampous 30, 44)
Moldova 2 (Popescu 55, Stina 88)

Mar 30 – Kigali
Rwanda 2 (Biramahire 30, Mickels 51)
Estonia 0

Mar 30 – Santiago de los Caballeros
Guyana 3 (De Rosario 2, 22, 90+1)
Belize 1 (Wade 8)

Mar 31 – Melbourne
Cameroon 2 (Etta Eyong 3, Alioum 9)
China 0

Mar 31 – Melbourne
Australia 5 (Mabil 23, Circati 67, Bos 71, Irankunda 80, 84)
Curacao 1 (Martha 50)

Mar 31 – Antalya
Iran 5 (Gholizadeh 11, Taremi 19 pen, 34 pen, Mohebi 31, Ghayedi 54)
Costa Rica 0

Mar 31 – Podgorica
Montenegro 2 (Osmajic 20, 44)
Slovenia 3 (Vipotnik 41, 55, Sturm 47)

Mar 31 – Oslo
Norway 0
Switzerland 0

Mar 31 – Backa Topola
Serbia 2 (Pavlovic 66, A. Mitrovic 70)
Saudi Arabia 1 (Al Hamdan 8)

Mar 31 – Francistown
Zimbabwe 1 (Kafunti 88 og)
Zambia 0

Mar 31 – Saint Petersburg
Russia 0
Mali 0

Mar 31 – Budapest
Hungary 0
Greece 0

Mar 31 – Antalya
Jordan 2 (Al Tamari 17, Al Dawoud 77)
Nigeria 2 (Simon 25, Fernandez 41)

Mar 31 – Cape Town
South Africa 1 (Mbokazi 64)
Panama 2 (Cordoba 58, Ramos 77)

Mar 31 – Toronto
Haiti 1 (Isidor 88)
Iceland 1 (Sigurdsson 61)

Mar 31 – Lens
Morocco 2 (El Khannouss 48, El Aynaoui 53)
Paraguay 1 (Caballero 88)

Mar 31 – Leganes
Peru 2 (Velez 6, 58)
Honduras 2 (Palma 44, Mencia 90+4)

Mar 31 – Turin
Algeria 0
Uruguay 0

Mar 31 – Liverpool
Ivory Coast 1 (Pepe 12)
Scotland 0

Mar 31 – Vienna
Austria 1 (Sabitzer 48)
South Korea 0

Mar 31 – Wembley
England 0
Japan 1 (Mitoma 23)

Mar 31 – Eindhoven
Netherlands 1 (Pacho 3 og)
Ecuador 1 (Valencia 24 pen)

Mar 31 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 0
North Macedonia 0

Mar 31 – Bratislava
Slovakia 2 (Birligea 7 og, Strelec 46)
Romania 0

Mar 31 – Valencia
Ukraine 1 (Hutsuliak 46)
Albania 0

Mar 31 – Cardiff
Wales 1 (Thomas 46)
Northern Ireland 1 (Donley 22)

Mar 31 – Dakar
Senegal 3 (Seck 45+4, Mbaye 47, L. Camara 90+5)
Gambia 1 (Colley 51)

Mar 31 – Barcelona
Spain 0
Egypt 0

Mar 31 – Astana
Kazakhstan 1 (Orazov 4)
Comoros 0

Mar 31 – Serravalle
San Marino 0
Andorra 0

Apr 1 – Atlanta
United States 0
Portugal 2 (Trincao 37, Joao Felix 59)

Apr 1 – Buenos Aires
Argentina 5 (Alvarez 4, Messi 43, Otamendi 50 pen, Chanda 68 og, Barco 90+4)
Zambia 0

Apr 1 – Orlando
Brazil 3 (Danilo Santos 45+2, Igor Thiago 88 pen, Martinelli 90+2)
Croatia 1 (Majer 84)

Apr 1 – Toronto
Canada 0
Tunisia 0

Apr 1 – Chicago
Mexico 1 (J. Sanchez 19)
Belgium 1 (Lukebakio 46)

Club Football EUROPE

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 10 – Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 1 (Lemina 7)
Liverpool (Eng) 0

Mar 10 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 1 (Pasalic 90+3)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 6 (Stanisic 12, Olise 22, 64, Gnabry 25, Jackson 52, Musiala 67)

Mar 10 – Newcastle
Newcastle United (Eng) 1 (Barnes 86)
Barcelona (Spa) 1 (Yamal 90+6 pen)

Mar 10 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 5 (Llorente 6, Griezmann 14, Alvarez 15, 55, Le Normand 22)
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 2 (Porro 26, Solanke 76)

Mar 11 – Paris
PSG (Fra) 5 (Barcola 10, Dembele 40, Vitinha 74, Kvaratskhelia 86, 90+4)
Chelsea (Eng) 2 (Gusto 28, Fernandez 57)

Mar 11 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 3 (Valverde 20, 27, 42)
Manchester City (Eng) 0

Mar 11 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 3 (Fet 32 pen, Blomberg 45+1, Hogh 71)
Sporting (Por) 0

Mar 11 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 1 (Andrich 46)
Arsenal (Eng) 1 (Havertz 89 pen)

Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 17 – London
Chelsea (Eng) 0
PSG (Fra) 3 (Kvaratskhelia 6, Barcola 15, Mayulu 62)
PSG win 8-2 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 1 (Haaland 41)
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Vinicius Jr 22 pen, 90+3)
Real Madrid win 5-1 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 5 (Inacio 34, Goncalves 61, Suarez 78 pen, Araujo 92, Nel 120+1)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 0
After Extra-Time; Sporting win 5-3 on aggregate

Mar 17 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 2 (Eze 36, Rice 63)
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 0
Arsenal win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 18 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 4 (Szoboszlai 25, Ekitike 51, Gravenberch 53, Salah 62)
Galatasaray (Tur) 0
Liverpool win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 18 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 4 (Kane 25 pen, 54, Karl 56, Diaz 70)
Atalanta (Ita) 1 (Samardzic 85)
Bayern Munich win 10-2 on aggregate

Mar 18 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 7 (Raphinha 6, 72, Bernal 18, Yamal 45+7 pen, Fermin 51, Lewandowski 56, 61)
Newcastle United (Eng) 2 (Elanga 15, 28)
Barcelona win 8-3 on aggregate

Mar 18 – London
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 3 (Kolo Muani 30, Simons 52, 90 pen)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 2 (Alvarez 47, Hancko 75)
Atletico Madrid win 7-5 on aggregate

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 7 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 1 (Mbappe 74)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Diaz 41, Kane 46)

Apr 7 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 0
Arsenal (Eng) 1 (Havertz 90+1)

Apr 8 – Paris
PSG (Fra) 2 (Doue 11, Kvaratskhelia 65)
Liverpool (Eng) 0

Apr 8 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 0
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 2 (Alvarez 45, Sorloth 70)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 14 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 0
PSG (Fra) 2 (Dembele 71, 90+1)
PSG win 4-0 on aggregate

Apr 14 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 1 (Lookman 31)
Barcelona (Spa) 2 (Yamal 4, Torres 24)
Atletico Madrid win 3-2 on aggregate

Apr 15 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 4 (Pavlovic 6, Kane 38, Diaz 89, Olise 90+4)
Real Madrid (Spa) 3 (Guler 1, 29, Mbappe 42)
Bayern Munich win 6-4 on aggregate

Apr 15 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 0
Sporting (Por) 0
Arsenal win 1-0 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 28 – Paris
PSG (Fra) 5 (Kvaratskhelia 24, 56, Neves 33, Dembele 45+5 pen, 58)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 4 (Kane 17 pen, Olise 41, Upamecano 65, Diaz 68)

Apr 29 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 1 (Alvarez 56 pen)
Arsenal (Eng) 1 (Gyokeres 44 pen)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 5 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 1 (Saka 45)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 0
Arsenal win 2-1 on aggregate

May 6 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 1 (Kane 90+4)
PSG (Fra) 1 (Dembele 3)
PSG win 6-5 on aggregate

2025-26 EUROPA LEAGUE

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 12 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 2 (Kanichowsky 32, Joseph 69)
Braga (Por) 0

Mar 12 – Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 1 (Taborda 88 pen)
Real Betis (Spa) 0

Mar 12 – Genk
Genk (Bel) 1 (El Ouahdi 24)
Freiburg (Ger) 0

Mar 12 – Vigo
Celta Vigo (Spa) 1 (Rueda 25)
Lyon (Fra) 1 (Endrick 87)

Mar 12 – Stuttgart
Stuttgart (Ger) 1 (Undav 40)
Porto (Por) 2 (Moffi 21, Mora 27)

Mar 12 – Nottingham
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 0
Midtjylland (Den) 1 (Cho Gue-sung 80)

Mar 12 – Bologna
Bologna (Ita) 1 (Bernardeschi 50)
Roma (Ita) 1 (Pellegrini 71)

Mar 12 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 0
Aston Villa (Eng) 1 (Watkins 61)

Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 18 – Braga
Braga (Por) 4 (Horta 11, 53, Grillitsch 15, Martinez 34)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 0
Braga win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 4 (Ruibal 8, Amrabat 45+1, Hernandez 53, Antony 66)
Panathinaikos (Gre) 0
Real Betis win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Freiburg
Freiburg (Ger) 5 (Ginter 19, Matanovic 25, Grifo 53, Suzuki 57, Eggestein 79)
Genk (Bel) 1 (Smets 39)
Freiburg win 5-2 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Lyon
Lyon (Fra) 0
Celta Vigo (Spa) 2 (Rueda 61, Jutgla 90+2)
Celta Vigo win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Porto
Porto (Por) 2 (William Gomes 21, Froholdt 72)
Stuttgart (Ger) 0
Porto win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Herning
Midtjylland (Den) 1 (Erlic 69)
Nott'm Forest (Eng) 2 (Dominguez 41, Yates 52)
After Extra-Time; 2-2 on aggregate
Nottingham Forest win 3-0 on pens

Mar 19 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 3 (Ndicka 32, Malen 69 pen, Pellegrini 80)
Bologna (Ita) 4 (Rowe 22, Bernardeschi 45+2 pen, Castro 58, Cambiaghi 111)
After Extra-Time; Bologna win 5-4 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 2 (McGinn 54, Bailey 86)
Lille (Fra) 0
Aston Villa win 3-0 on aggregate

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 8 – Braga
Braga (Por) 1 (Grillitsch 5)
Real Betis (Spa) 1 (Hernandez 61 pen)

Apr 9 – Freiburg
Freiburg (Ger) 3 (Grifo 10, Beste 32, Ginter 78)
Celta Vigo (Spa) 0

Apr 9 – Porto
Porto (Por) 1 (William Gomes 11)
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 1 (Fernandes 13 og)

Apr 9 – Bologna
Bologna (Ita) 1 (Rowe 90)
Aston Villa (Eng) 3 (Konsa 44, Watkins 51, 90+4)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 16 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 2 (Antony 13, Ezzalzouli 26)
Braga (Por) 4 (Victor 38, Carvalho 49, Horta 53 pen, Gorby 74)
Braga win 5-3 on aggregate

Apr 16 – Vigo
Celta Vigo (Spa) 1 (Swedberg 90+1)
Freiburg (Ger) 3 (Matanovic 33, Suzuki 39, 50)
Freiburg win 6-1 on aggregate

Apr 16 – Nottingham
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 1 (Gibbs-White 12)
Porto (Por) 0
Nottingham Forest win 2-1 on aggregate

Apr 16 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 4 (Watkins 16, Buendia 26, Rogers 39, Konsa 89)
Bologna (Ita) 0
Aston Villa win 7-1 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 30 – Braga
Braga (Por) 2 (Tiknaz 8, Dorgeles 90+2)
Freiburg (Ger) 1 (Grifo 16)

Apr 30 – Nottingham
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 1 (Wood 71 pen)
Aston Villa (Eng) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 30 – Freiburg
Freiburg (Ger) 3 (Kubler 19, 72, Manzambi 41)
Braga (Por) 1 (Victor 79)
Freiburg win 4-3 on aggregate

Apr 30 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 4 (Watkins 36, Buendia 58 pen, McGinn 77, 80)
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 0
Aston Villa win 4-1 on aggregate

2025-26 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 12 – Poznan
Lech Poznan (Pol) 1 (Ishak 70)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 3 (Marlon Gomes 36, Newerton 48, Isaque 85)

Mar 12 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 2 (Parrott 29, 87)
Sparta Prague (Cze) 1 (Vojta 50)

Mar 12 – London
Crystal Palace (Eng) 0
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 0

Mar 12 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Ndour 62, Gudmundsson 90+3 pen)
Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 1 (Brunes 60)

Mar 12 – Samsun
Samsunspor (Tur) 1 (Mouandilmadji 21)
Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 3 (Alemao 15, 78, Garcia 40)

Mar 12 – Celje
Celje (Svn) 0
AEK Athens (Gre) 4 (Varga 3, Koita 33, Gacinovic 36, Moukoudi 49)

Mar 12 – Olomouc
Sigma Olomouc (Cze) 0
Mainz (Ger) 0

Mar 12 – Rijeka
Rijeka (Cro) 1 (Majstorovic 76)
Strasbourg (Fra) 2 (Panichelli 2, Godo 72)

Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 19 – Krakow
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 1 (Moutinho 67 og)
Lech Poznan (Pol) 2 (Ishak 13, 45+7 pen)
Shakhtar Donetsk win 4-3 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Prague
Sparta Prague (Cze) 0
AZ (Ned) 4 (Jensen 8, Parrott 58, Mijnans 62, Daal 73)
AZ win 6-1 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Larnaca
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 1 (Saborit 63)
Crystal Palace (Eng) 2 (Sarr 13, 99)
AET; Crystal Palace win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Sosnowiec
Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 1 (Struski 46)
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Piccoli 68, Pongracic 90+7)
Fiorentina win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Madrid
Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 0
Samsunspor (Tur) 1 (Ndiaye 65)
Rayo Vallecano win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Athens
AEK Athens (Gre) 0
Celje (Svn) 2 (Iosifov 13, Pozeg Vancac 42)
AEK Athens win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Mainz
Mainz (Ger) 2 (Posch 46, Sieb 82)
Sigma Olomouc (Cze) 0
Mainz win 2-0 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Strasbourg
Strasbourg (Fra) 1 (Barco 71)
Rijeka (Cro) 1 (Fruk 21)
Strasbourg win 3-2 on aggregate

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 9 – Krakow
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 3 (Pedrinho 72, Alisson 81, 83)
AZ (Ned) 0

Apr 9 – London
Crystal Palace (Eng) 3 (Mateta 24 pen, Mitchell 31, Sarr 90)
Fiorentina (Ita) 0

Apr 9 – Madrid
Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 3 (Akhomach 2, Lopez 45+2, Palazon 74 pen)
AEK Athens (Gre) 0

Apr 9 – Mainz
Mainz (Ger) 2 (Sano 11, Posch 19
Strasbourg (Fra) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 16 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 2 (Jensen 73, Sin 80)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 2 (Alisson 58, Luca Meirelles 83)
Shakhtar Donetsk win 5-2 on aggregate

Apr 16 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Gudmundsson 30 pen, Ndour 53)
Crystal Palace (Eng) 1 (Sarr 17)
Crystal Palace win 4-2 on aggregate

Apr 16 – Athens
AEK Athens (Gre) 3 (Zini 13, 51, Marin 36 pen)
Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 1 (Palazon 60)
Rayo Vallecano win 4-3 on aggregate

Apr 16 – Strasbourg
Strasbourg (Fra) 4 (Nanasi 26, Ouattara 35, Enciso 69, Emegha 74)
Mainz (Ger) 0
Strasbourg win 4-2 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 30 – Krakow
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 1 (Ocheretko 47)
Crystal Palace (Eng) 3 (Sarr 1, Kamada 58, Strand Larsen 84)

Apr 30 – Madrid
Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 1 (Alemao 54)
Strasbourg (Fra) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 7 – London
Crystal Palace (Eng) 2 (Pedrinho 25 og, Sarr 52)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 1 (Eguinaldo 34)
Crystal Palace win 5-2 on aggregate

May 7 – Strasbourg
Strasbourg (Fra) 0
Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 1 (Alemao 42)
Rayo Vallecano win 2-0 on aggregate

League Tables 2025-26

Final standings for the European domestic season will be included in July's issue, along with reviews of all three of UEFA's club competitions' finals

SOUTH AMERICA

2026 COPA LIBERTADORES

Third Stage Qualifying – 1st Leg

Mar 3 – Guayaquil
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 1 (Villalba 22)
Botafogo (Bra) 1 (Matheus Martins 66)

Mar 4 – Rancagua
O'Higgins (Chi) 1 (F. Gonzalez 45+8)
Tolima (Col) 0

Mar 4 – Valencia
Carabobo (Ven) 0
Sporting Cristal (Per) 1 (Yotun 14 pen)

Mar 5 – Montevideo
Juventud (Uru) 1 (Larregui 74)
Independiente Medellin (Col) 1 (Larrosa 32)

Third Stage Qualifying – 2nd Leg

Mar 10 – Rio deJaneiro
Botafogo (Bra) 0
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 1 (Celiz 8)
Barcelona SC win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 11 – Ibague
Tolima (Col) 2 (Hernandez 38, Torres 87)
O'Higgins (Chi) 0
Tolima win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 11 – Lima
Sporting Cristal (Per) 1 (Castro 50)
Carabobo (Ven) 2 (Castillo 4, 29)
2-2 on agg; Sporting Cristal win 3-2 on pens

Mar 12 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Col) 2 (H. Palacios 14, Fydriszewski 82)
Juventud (Uru) 1 (Barrandeguy 25)
Independiente Medellin win 3-2 on aggregate

Group A

Apr 8 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Col) 1 (F. Chaverra 63)
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Palacios 4)

Apr 8 – Cusco
Cusco (Per) 0
Flamengo (Bra) 2 (Bruno Henrique 59, De Arrascaeta 90+2)

Apr 14 – La Plata
Estudiantes (Arg) 2 (Farias 28, Palacios 48)
Cusco (Per) 1 (Colitto 31)

Apr 16 – Rio deJaneiro
Flamengo (Bra) 4 (Paqueta 15, Bruno Henrique 45, De Arrascaeta 49, Pedro 90+6)
Independiente Medellin (Col) 1 (Gonzalez 40)

Apr 29 – La Plata
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Carrillo 55)
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Luiz Araujo 33)

Apr 30 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Col) 1 (Fydriszewski 87)
Cusco (Per) 0

May 6 – Cusco
Cusco (Per) 1 (Colitto 37)
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Palacios 58)

May 7 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Col) 0
Flamengo (Bra) 3 (*Awarded*)

May 20 – Rio deJaneiro
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Pedro 65)
Estudiantes (Arg) 0

May 20 – Cusco
Cusco (Per) 2 (Choi 78, Fuentes 90+4)
Independiente Medellin (Col) 3 (Fydriszewski 13, Perlaza 90+1, Serna 90+7)

Group B

Apr 7 – Ibague
Tolima (Col) 0
Universitario (Per) 0

Apr 8 – Coquimbo
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 1 (Fernandez 90+5)
Nacional (Uru) 1 (Coates 22)

Apr 14 – Montevideo
Nacional (Uru) 3 (Gomez 48, Coates 64, Lopez 87)
Tolima (Col) 1 (Rovira 80)

Apr 14 – Lima
Universitario (Per) 0
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 2 (Zavala 13, Johansen 49)

Apr 28 – Ibague
Tolima (Col) 3 (Guzman 59 pen, Sandoval 66, Gonzalez 78)
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 0

Apr 29 – Lima
Universitario (Per) 4 (Fara 40, Valera 46, Alzugaray 81, Carabali 90+1)
Nacional (Uru) 2 (Gomez 14 pen, Silvera 71)

May 6 – Ibague
Tolima (Col) 3 (Sandoval 45+7 pen, Mosquera 78, Gonzalez 89)
Nacional (Uru) 0

May 7 – Coquimbo
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 2 (Vadala 50, 72)
Universitario (Per) 1 (Valera 33)

May 19 – Coquimbo
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 3 (Fernandez 27, Zavala 45+4, Johansen 55)
Tolima (Col) 0

May 20 – Montevideo
Nacional (Uru) 0
Universitario (Per) 0

Group C

Apr 7 – Mendoza
Independiente Rivadavia (Arg) 1 (Lampe 1 og)
Bolivar (Bol) 0

Apr 7 – Caracas
Deportivo La Guaira (Ven) 0
Fluminense (Bra) 0

Apr 14 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 1 (Romero 79)
Deportivo La Guaira (Ven) 1 (Londono 29)

Apr 15 – Rio deJaneiro
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Arana 10)
Independiente Rivadavia (Arg) 2 (Sartori 37, Arce 51)

Apr 30 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 2 (Robson Matheus 6, 61)
Fluminense (Bra) 0

Apr 30 – Mendoza
Independiente Rivadavia (Arg) 4 (Arce 27, 45+2, 64, Villa 45 pen)
Deportivo La Guaira (Ven) 1 (Ortiz 32)

May 6 – Caracas
Deportivo La Guaira (Ven) 1 (Meza 31)
Bolivar (Bol) 1 (Justiniano 90+4)

May 6 – Mendoza
Independiente Rivadavia (Arg) 1 (Arce 66)
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (John Kennedy 90+1)

May 19 – Rio deJaneiro
Fluminense (Bra) 2 (Acosta 6, John Kennedy 70)
Bolivar (Bol) 1 (Melgar 24)

May 21 – Caracas
Deportivo La Guaira (Ven) 2 (Osio 29, Castellanos 80)
Independiente Rivadavia (Arg) 4 (Arce 20, 60, 76, Villa 34)

Group D

Apr 7 – Guayaquil
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 0
Cruzeiro (Bra) 1 (Matheus Pereira 53)

Apr 7 – Santiago
Universidad Catolica (Chi) 1 (Diaz 83)
Boca Juniors (Arg) 2 (Paredes 16, Bareiro 65)

Apr 14 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 3 (Di Lollo 39, Ascacibar 81, Herrera 90+4)
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 0

Apr 15 – Belo Horizonte
Cruzeiro (Bra) 1 (Matheus Pereira 60 pen)
Universidad Catolica (Chi) 2 (Giani 29, Martinez 90+4)

Apr 28 – Belo Horizonte
Cruzeiro (Bra) 1 (Villarreal 83)
Boca Juniors (Arg) 0

Apr 29 – Guayaquil
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 1 (Celiz 79)
Universidad Catolica (Chi) 2 (Zampedri 17, Montes 22)

May 5 – Guayaquil
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 1 (Villalba 73)
Boca Juniors (Arg) 0

May 6 – Santiago
Universidad Catolica (Chi) 0
Cruzeiro (Bra) 0

May 19 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 1 (Merentiel 15)
Cruzeiro (Bra) 1 (Fagner 54)

May 21 – Santiago
Universidad Catolica (Chi) 2 (Zampedri 77, 84)
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 0

Group E

Apr 9 – Florida
Platense (Arg) 0
Corinthians (Bra) 2 (Kayke 53, Yuri Alberto 70)

Apr 9 – Bogota
Santa Fe (Col) 1 (Olivera 20)
Penarol (Uru) 1 (Arezo 59)

Apr 15 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 2 (Raniele 51, Gustavo Henrique 80)
Santa Fe (Col) 0

Apr 16 – Montevideo
Penarol (Uru) 1 (Arezo 58)
Platense (Arg) 2 (Mainero 22, Zapiola 63 pen)

Apr 29 – Florida
Platense (Arg) 2 (Nasif 57, Mendia 63)
Santa Fe (Col) 1 (Fagundez 90+4)

Apr 30 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 2 (Gustavo Henrique 11, Lingard 25)
Penarol (Uru) 0

May 6 – Bogota
Santa Fe (Col) 1 (Rodallega 59)
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Gustavo Henrique 90+3)

May 7 – Florida
Platense (Arg) 1 (Lagos 39)
Penarol (Uru) 1 (Batista 29)

May 19 – Bogota
Santa Fe (Col) 2 (Scarpeta 48, Rodallega 71)
Platense (Arg) 1 (Lotti 73)

May 21 – Montevideo
Penarol (Uru) 1 (Olivera 19)
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Labyad 63)

Group F

Apr 8 – Cartagena
Junior (Col) 1 (Gutierrez 10 pen)
Palmeiras (Bra) 1 (Sosa 56)

Apr 8 – Callao
Sporting Cristal (Per) 1 (Vizeu 82)
Cerro Porteno (Par) 0

Apr 14 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Torres 57)
Junior (Col) 0

Apr 16 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 2 (Murilo 27, Lopez 80 pen)
Sporting Cristal (Per) 1 (J. Gonzalez 41)

Apr 28 – Lima
Sporting Cristal (Per) 2 (S. Gonzalez 52, Cabellos 90+1)
Junior (Col) 0

Apr 29 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Carlos Miguel 72 og)
Palmeiras (Bra) 1 (Arias 33)

May 5 – Lima
Sporting Cristal (Per) 0
Palmeiras (Bra) 2 (Lopez 32, Sosa 50)

May 7 – Cartagena
Junior (Col) 0
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Vegetti 13)

May 20 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 0
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Vegetti 48)

May 20 – Cartagena
Junior (Col) 3 (Muriel 9, 36, Perez 28)
Sporting Cristal (Per) 2 (Yotun 45+5, Cazonatti 56)

Group G

Apr 7 – El Alto
Always Ready (Bol) 0
LDU Quito (Ecu) 1 (Villamil 90+4)

Apr 8 – Mirassol
Mirassol (Bra) 1 (Joao Victor 60)
Lanus (Arg) 0

Apr 14 – Quito
LDU Quito (Ecu) 2 (Y. Quinonez 6, Quintero 34)
Mirassol (Bra) 0

Apr 16 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 1 (Valois 67)
Always Ready (Bol) 0

Apr 28 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 1 (Cardozo 74)
LDU Quito (Ecu) 0

Apr 29 – Mirassol
Mirassol (Bra) 2 (Eduardo 10, Alesson 80)
Always Ready (Bol) 0

May 5 – El Alto
Always Ready (Bol) 4 (Gomez 26, Triverio 45, Amoroso 46, Suarez 89)
Lanus (Arg) 0

May 7 – Mirassol
Mirassol (Bra) 2 (Oliveira 47, Reinaldo 61 pen)
LDU Quito (Ecu) 0

May 19 – Asuncion
Always Ready (Bol) 1 (Maraude 75)
Mirassol (Bra) 2 (Shaylon 11, Nathan Fogaca 82)

May 20 – Quito
LDU Quito (Ecu) 2 (Pena Biafore 74 og, Cornejo 90+1)
Lanus (Arg) 0

Group H

Apr 9 – Caracas
Universidad Central (Ven) 3 (Cuesta 30, Murillo 88, Sole 90+6 pen)
Libertad (Par) 1 (Melgarejo 61)

Apr 9 – Rosario
Rosario Central (Arg) 0
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 0

Apr 15 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 0
Rosario Central (Arg) 1 (Copetti 83)

Apr 15 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 3 (Alcivar 44, Gonzalez 45+5, 63)
Universidad Central (Ven) 1 (Bolivar 21)

Apr 28 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 2 (Melgarejo 37, 85 pen)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 3 (Gonzalez 33, 51, 65)

Apr 28 – Caracas
Universidad Central (Ven) 0
Rosario Central (Arg) 3 (Ovando 35, Di Maria 53 pen, Copetti 90+3)

May 5 – Rosario
Rosario Central (Arg) 1 (Ovando 57)
Libertad (Par) 0

May 5 – Caracas
Universidad Central (Ven) 2 (Zapata 54, Cuesta 67)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 0

May 19 – Rosario
Rosario Central (Arg) 4 (Veliz 22, Pizarro 39, Di Maria 71, Ruben 88)
Universidad Central (Ven) 0

May 19 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 4 (Sornoza 38, Gonzalez 43, Lerma 64, Reasco 90+5)
Libertad (Par) 1 (Melgarejo 45+3)

• *Copa Libertadores matchday six results and final standings will be included in July's issue*

2026 COPA SUDAMERICANA

First Stage Qualifying

Mar 3: Independiente Petrolero (Bol) 0-0 Guabira (Bol) (*Independiente Petrolero win 3-2 on pens*); Cobresal (Chi) 1-1 Audax Italiano (Chi) (*Audax Italiano win 3-2 on pens*); Alianza Atletico (Per) 2-0 Deportivo Garcilaso (Per); Montevideo City Torque (Uru) 1-0 Defensor Sporting (Uru); Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 0-0 Monagas (Ven) (*Academia Puerto Cabello win 5-3 on pens*)
Mar 4: Blooming (Bol) 3-0 San Antonio Bulo Bulo (Bol); Universidad de Chile (Chi) 1-2 Palestino (Chi); Atletico Nacional (Col) 1-3 Millonarios (Col); Deportivo Cuenca (Ecu) 3-0 Libertad (Ecu); Sportivo Trinidense (Par) 0-1 Olimpia (Par); Caracas (Ven) 0-0 Metropolitanos (Ven) (*Caracas win 4-3 on pens*)
Mar 5: America de Cali (Col) 2-1 Atletico Bucaramanga (Col); Orense (Ecu) 0-1 Macara (Ecu); Nacional (Par) 1-1 Recoleta (Par) (*Recoleta win 5-4 on pens*); Cienciano (Per) 1-1 Melgar (Per) (*Cienciano win 5-4 on pens*); Boston River (Uru) 1-0 Racing (Uru)

Group A

Apr 7-9: Alianza Atletico (Per) 1-1 Tigre (Arg); Macara (Ecu) 1-1 America de Cali (Col)
Apr 15-16: America de Cali (Col) 2-1 Alianza Atletico (Per); Tigre (Arg) 0-1 Macara (Ecu)
Apr 30: Tigre (Arg) 2-0 America de Cali (Col); Alianza Atletico (Per) 0-2 Macara (Ecu)
May 6: Macara (Ecu) 2-2 Tigre (Arg); Alianza Atletico (Per) 0-2 America de Cali (Col)
May 19-21: America de Cali (Col) 1-1 Tigre (Arg); Macara (Ecu) 0-0 Alianza Atletico (Per)

Group B

Apr 8-9:
Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 2-1 Atletico Mineiro (Bra); Juventud (Uru) 1-1 Cienciano (Per)
Apr 16: Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 2-1 Juventud (Uru); Cienciano (Per) 2-0 Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven)

Apr 29:
Juventud (Uru) 4-0 Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven); Cienciano (Per) 1-0 Atletico Mineiro (Bra)
May 5: Juventud (Uru) 2-2 Atletico Mineiro (Bra); Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 3-0 Cienciano (Per)
May 21: Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 2-0 Cienciano (Per); Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 1-1 Juventud (Uru)

Group C

Apr 7: O'Higgins (Chi) 2-0 Millonarios (Col); Boston River (Uru) 0-1 Sao Paulo (Bra)
Apr 14-15: Sao Paulo (Bra) 2-0 O'Higgins (Chi); Millonarios (Col) 1-0 Boston River (Uru)
Apr 28: Millonarios (Col) 0-0 Sao Paulo (Bra); O'Higgins (Chi) 2-0 Boston River (Uru)
May 7: Boston River (Uru) 2-4 Millonarios (Col); O'Higgins (Chi) 0-0 Sao Paulo (Bra)
May 19-20: Sao Paulo (Bra) 1-1 Millonarios (Col); Boston River (Uru) 3-2 O'Higgins (Chi)

Group D

Apr 8: Recoleta (Par) 1-1 San Lorenzo (Arg); Deportivo Cuenca (Ecu) 1-0 Santos (Bra)
Apr 14-16: Santos (Bra) 1-1 Recoleta (Par); San Lorenzo (Arg) 2-0 Deportivo Cuenca (Ecu)
Apr 28: San Lorenzo (Arg) 1-1 Santos (Bra); Recoleta (Par) 0-0 Deportivo Cuenca (Ecu)
May 5: Recoleta (Par) 1-1 Santos (Bra); Deportivo Cuenca (Ecu) 0-0 San Lorenzo (Arg)
May 19-20: Deportivo Cuenca (Ecu) 2-2 Recoleta (Par); Santos (Bra) 2-2 San Lorenzo (Arg)

Group E

Apr 7-9: Independiente Petrolero (Bol) 1-3 Racing (Arg); Botafogo (Bra) 1-1 Caracas (Ven)
Apr 15: Caracas (Ven) 1-0 Independiente Petrolero (Bol); Racing (Arg) 2-3 Botafogo (Bra)
Apr 28-29: Botafogo (Bra) 3-0 Independiente Petrolero (Bol); Caracas (Ven) 1-1 Racing (Arg)
May 5-6: Independiente Petrolero (Bol) 2-3 Caracas (Ven); Botafogo (Bra) 2-1 Racing (Arg)
May 20-21: Independiente Petrolero (Bol) 0-3 Botafogo (Bra); Racing (Arg) 2-2 Caracas (Ven)

Group F

Apr 8: Deportivo Riestra (Arg) 0-0 Palestino (Chi); Montevideo City Torque (Uru) 1-0 Gremio (Bra)
Apr 14: Gremio (Bra) 1-0 Deportivo Riestra (Arg); Palestino (Chi) 0-2 Montevideo City Torque (Uru)
Apr 29: Deportivo Riestra (Arg) 2-1 Montevideo City Torque (Uru); Palestino (Chi) 0-0 Gremio (Bra)
May 5-6:
Deportivo Riestra (Arg) 0-3 Gremio (Bra); Montevideo City Torque (Uru) 1-0 Palestino (Chi)
May 19-20:
Montevideo City Torque (Uru) 4-1 Deportivo Riestra (Arg); Gremio (Bra) 2-0 Palestino (Chi)

Group G

Apr 7-8: Barracas Central (Arg) 0-0 Vasco da Gama (Bra); Audax Italiano (Chi) 0-2 Olimpia (Par)
Apr 14-15:
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 1-2 Audax Italiano (Chi); Olimpia (Par) 0-0 Barracas Central (Arg)
Apr 28-30:
Barracas Central (Arg) 1-1 Audax Italiano (Chi); Vasco da Gama (Bra) 3-0 Olimpia (Par)
May 6: Audax Italiano (Chi) 1-2 Vasco da Gama (Bra); Barracas Central (Arg) 1-2 Olimpia (Par)
May 19-20:
Audax Italiano (Chi) 2-0 Barracas Central (Arg); Olimpia (Par) 3-1 Vasco da Gama (Bra)

Group H

Apr 8-9: Blooming (Bol) 1-1 River Plate (Arg); Carabobo (Ven) 1-0 Red Bull Bragantino (Bra)
Apr 15-16: River Plate (Arg) 1-0 Carabobo (Ven); Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 3-2 Blooming (Bol)
Apr 30: Carabobo (Ven) 2-0 Blooming (Bol); Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 0-1 River Plate (Arg)
May 7: Blooming (Bol) 0-6 Red Bull Bragantino (Bra); Carabobo (Ven) 1-2 River Plate (Arg)
May 20-21:
River Plate (Arg) 1-1 Red Bull Bragantino (Bra); Blooming (Bol) 0-2 Carabobo (Ven)

• *Copa Sudamericana matchday six results and final standings will be included in July's issue*

URUGUAY

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Racing*	15	9	4	2	23	14	31
Deportivo Maldonado	15	9	2	4	24	16	29
Albion	15	8	4	3	26	16	28
Penarol	15	8	3	4	23	16	27
Central Espanol	15	7	3	5	23	22	24
Montevideo City Torque	15	6	5	4	22	16	23
Nacional	15	7	1	7	26	21	22
Defensor Sporting	15	5	6	4	13	11	21
Liverpool	15	5	5	5	20	18	20
Montevideo Wanderers	15	6	2	7	16	21	20
Danubio	15	4	6	5	17	21	18
Cerro Largo	15	5	2	8	16	19	17
Boston River	15	5	2	8	14	20	17
Juventud	15	4	3	8	17	22	15
Progreso	15	2	4	9	12	23	10
Cerro	15	2	4	9	8	24	10

**Advance to championship play-off*

AFRICA

2025-26 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Mar 13 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 3 (Mudau 34, Leon 55, Rayners 74)
Stade Malien (Mli) 0

Mar 13 – Rabat
AS FAR (Mar) 1 (Hammoudan 8)
Pyramids (Egy) 1 (Zalaka 52)

Mar 14 – Berkane
RS Berkane (Mar) 1 (Chouiar 90+10 pen)
Al Hilal (Sdn) 1 (Raouf 13)

Mar 15 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Tougai 73 pen)
Al Ahly (Egy) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Mar 21 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 2 (Trezeguet 10, Jelassi 84 og)
Esperance (Tun) 3 (Danho 68, Tougai 78 pen, Jelassi 90+4)
Esperance win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 21 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 1 (Mayele 62)
AS FAR (Mar) 2 (Slim 9, Hrimat 54)
AS FAR win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 22 – Kigali
Al Hilal (Sdn) 0
RS Berkane (Mar) 1 (Chouiar 90+3)
RS Berkane win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 22 – Bamako
Stade Malien (Mli) 2 (Nkeng 1, Mandjan 40)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns win 3-2 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 11 – Rabat
AS FAR (Mar) 2 (Hammoudan 58, Ait Ouarkhane 80)
RS Berkane (Mar) 0

Apr 12 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Leon 51)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 18 – Berkane
RS Berkane (Mar) 1 (Labhiri 57 pen)
AS FAR (Mar) 0
AS FAR win 2-1 on aggregate

Apr 18 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Leon 35)
Esperance (Tun) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns win 2-0 on aggregate

Final

May 17 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Modiba 37)
AS FAR (Mar) 0

May 24 – Rabat
AS FAR (Mar) 1 (Hrimat 40 pen)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Mokoena 45+7)
Mamelodi Sundowns win 2-1 on aggregate

2025-26 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Quarter-Finals

Mar 14-15: Al Masry (Egy) 1-1 CR Belouizdad (Alg); AS Otoho (Cgo) 1-1 Zamalek (Egy); Olympic Safi (Mar) 1-1 Wydad AC (Mar); Maniema Union (Drc) 2-1 USM Alger (Alg)
Mar 21-22: CR Belouizdad (Alg) 0-0 Al Masry (Egy) (agg 1-1, *CR Belouizdad win on away goals*); Wydad AC (Mar) 2-2 Olympic Safi (Mar) (agg 3-3, *Olympic Safi win on away goals*); Zamalek (Egy) 2-1 AS Otoho (Cgo) (agg 3-2); USM Alger (Alg) 1-0 Maniema Union (Drc) (agg 2-2, *USM Alger win on away goals*)

Semi-Finals

Apr 10-11: USM Alger (Alg) 0-0 Olympic Safi (Mar); CR Belouizdad (Alg) 0-1 Zamalek (Egy)
Apr 17-19: Zamalek (Egy) 0-0 CR Belouizdad (Alg) (agg 1-0); Olympic Safi 1-1 USM Alger (Alg) (agg 1-1, *USM Alger win on away goals*)

Final – 1st Leg

May 9 – Algiers
USM Alger 1 (Khaldi 90+8 pen)
Zamalek (Egy) 0

Final – 2nd Leg

May 16 – Cairo
Zamalek (Egy) 1 (Dabbagh 5 pen)
USM Alger 0
Aggregate 1-1; USM Alger win 8-7 on pens

League Tables 2025-26

Final standings for the African domestic season will be included in July's issue

ASIA

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

East Region Last 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 3 – Chuncheon
Gangwon FC (Kor) 0
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 0

Mar 3 – Melbourne
Melbourne City (Aus) 1 (Mazzeo 90+5)
Buriram United (Tha) 1 (Bissoli 37)

Mar 4 – Seoul
FC Seoul (Kor) 0
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 1 (Thuler 23)

Mar 4 – Johor Bahru
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 3 (Aketxe 52, Bergson 63. M. Guilherme 85)
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 1 (Nene 86 og)

East Region Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 10 – Tokyo
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 1 (Nakamura 25)
Gangwon FC (Kor) 0
Machida Zelvia win 1-0 on aggregate

Mar 10 – Buriram
Buriram United (Tha) 0
Melbourne City (Aus) 0
After Extra-Time; 1-1 on aggregate
Buriram United win 4-2 on pens

Mar 11 – Kobe
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 2 (Osako 78, Ideguchi 89)
FC Seoul (Kor) 1 (Klimala 20)
Vissel Kobe win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 11 – Hiroshima
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 1 (Kinoshita 90 pen)
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 0
Johor Darul Ta'zim win 3-2 on aggregate

West Region Last 16

Apr 13 – Jeddah
Al Hilal (KSA) 3 (Milinkovic-Savic 29, S. Al Dawsari 55, Marcos Leonardo 67)
Al Sadd (Qat) 3 (Claudinho 36, Mujica 58, Firmino 70)
After Extra-Time; Al Sadd win 4-2 on pens

Apr 13 – Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 1 (Mahrez 117)
Al Duhail (Qat) 0
After Extra-Time

Apr 14 – Jeddah
Al Ittihad (KSA) 1 (Fabinho 120+10 pen)
Al Wahda (UAE) 0
After Extra-Time

Apr 14 – Jeddah
Tractor (Irn) 0
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 3 (Yuri Cesar 65 pen, Ezatolahi 80, Mateusao 90+8)

Quarter-Finals

Apr 16 – Jeddah
Al Sadd (Qat) 3 (Mujica 6, 61, Firmino 65)
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 3 (Osako 24, Ideguchi 74, Muto 90+3)
Vissel Kobe win 5-4 on pens

Apr 17 – Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 2 (Kessie 45+3, Galeno 54)
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 1 (Majrashi 19 og)

Apr 17 – Jeddah
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 1 (Yengi 31)
Al Ittihad (KSA) 0

Apr 18 – Jeddah
Buriram United (Tha) 2 (Bissoli 65, P. Zulj 71)
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 3 (P. Zulj 14 og, Ezatolahi 50, Renan 94)
After Extra-Time

Semi-Finals

Apr 20 – Jeddah
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 1 (Muto 31)
Al Ahli (KSA) 2 (Galeno 62, Toney 70)

Apr 21 – Jeddah
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 1 (Soma 13)
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 0

Final

Apr 25 – Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 1 (Al Buraikan 96)
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 0
After Extra-Time

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

Quarter-Finals

Mar 4-5: Gamba Osaka (Jpn) 1-1 Ratchaburi (Tha); Bangkok United (Tha) 2-1 Tampines Rovers (Sgp)
Mar 11-12: Ratchaburi (Tha) 1-2 Gamba Osaka (Jpn) (agg 2-3, *AET*); Tampines Rovers (Sgp) 2-2 Bangkok United (Tha) (agg 3-4)
Apr 19: Al Wasl (UAE) 0-4 Al Nassr (KSA); Al Ahli (Qat) 3-1 Al Hussein (Jor)

Semi-Finals

Apr 8: Gamba Osaka (Jpn) 0-1 Bangkok Utd (Tha)
Apr 15: Bangkok United (Tha) 0-3 Gamba Osaka (Jpn) (agg 1-3)
Apr 22: Al Nassr (KSA) 5-1 Al Ahli (Qat)

Final

May 16 – Riyadh
Al Nassr (KSA) 0
Gamba Osaka (Jpn) 1 (Hummet 30)

2025-26 AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals

Mar 5:
Phnom Penh Crown (Cam) 1-4 PKR Svay Rieng (Cam); Manila Digger (Phi) 1-0 Dewa United (Idn)
Mar 12: PKR Svay Rieng (Cam) 2-1 Phnom Penh Crown (Cam) (agg 6-2); Dewa United (Idn) 2-2 Manila Digger (Phi) (agg 2-3)
Apr 19: Al Ansar (Lbn) 0-3 Muras United (Kgz); Al Shabab (Oma) 3-5 Al Kuwait (Kuw)

Semi-Finals

Apr 9:
PKR Svay Rieng (Cam) 1-1 Manila Digger (Phi)
Apr 16: Manila Digger (Phi) 0-3 PKR Svay Rieng (Cam) (agg 1-4)
Apr 22: Muras United (Kgz) 1-2 Al Kuwait (Kuw)

Final

May 13 – Ardiya
Al Kuwait (Kuw) 4 (Barrahma 48, Marhoon 56, Amoory 99, Nasser 110)
PKR Svay Rieng (Cam) 3 (T. Alves 3, Fujii 9, Roque 96)
After Extra-Time

2025-26 GULF CLUB CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Semi-Finals

Apr 19: Zakho (Irq) 1-1 Al Shabab (KSA) (*AET, Al Shabab win 4-3 on pens*); Al Rayyan (Qat) 2-0 Al Qadsia (Kuw)

Final

Apr 23 – Al Rayyan
Al Shabab (KSA) 0
Al Rayyan (Qat) 3 (D. Garcia 60, Mitrovic 78, Guedes 81)

AUSTRALIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Newcastle Jets*	26	15	3	8	55	39	48
Adelaide United*	26	12	7	7	46	36	43
Auckland FC* (C)	26	11	9	6	42	29	42
Melbourne Victory*	26	11	7	8	44	33	40
Sydney FC*	26	11	6	9	33	25	39
Melbourne City*	26	10	8	8	33	33	38
Macarthur	26	9	7	10	37	44	34
Wellington Phoenix	26	9	6	11	36	48	33
Central Coast Mariners	26	8	8	10	35	42	32
Perth Glory	26	8	7	11	32	39	31
Brisbane Roar	26	6	8	12	27	36	26
Western Sydney Wanderers	26	5	6	15	27	43	21

**Advance to next stage*

Quarter-Finals

May 2: Auckland FC 1-1 Melbourne City (*AET, Auckland FC win 7-6 on pens*); Melbourne Victory 0-1 Sydney FC

Semi-Finals

May 9: Auckland FC 1-1 Adelaide United; Sydney FC 1-1 Newcastle Jets
May 15-16: Adelaide United 0-3 Auckland FC (agg 1-4); Newcastle Jets 1-1 Sydney FC (agg 2-2, *AET, Sydney FC win 4-2 on pens*)

Final

Mar 23 – Auckland
Auckland FC 1 (Howieson 60)
Sydney FC 0

BRUNEI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Indera (C)	11	10	1	0	46	10	31
Kasuka	11	10	0	1	85	7	30
Kota Ranger	11	7	2	2	51	22	23
MS PDB	11	6	1	4	29	16	19
MS ABDB	11	5	3	3	34	16	18
Rimba Star	11	6	0	5	36	22	18
KB FC	11	5	3	3	27	26	18
Jerudong	11	3	3	5	16	26	12
Brunei Shell	11	4	0	7	13	34	12
Wijaya	11	2	0	9	11	39	6
Lun Bawang (R)	11	1	1	9	12	48	4
Hawa (R)	11	0	0	11	7	101	0

CAMBODIA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PKR Svay Rieng	20	17	0	3	64	20	51
Phnom Penh Crown	20	14	4	2	43	23	46
Angkor Tiger	20	11	3	6	52	29	36
Nagaworld	20	10	5	5	33	20	35
Boeung Ket	20	9	5	6	26	17	32
MOI Kompong Dewa	20	8	6	6	26	26	30
Visakha	20	7	8	5	36	28	29
Royal Cambodian Armed Forces	20	4	5	11	20	51	17
Kirivong Sok Sen Chey	20	4	2	14	22	44	14
Life Sihanoukville	20	3	1	16	17	48	10
ISI Dangkor Senchey	20	2	3	15	18	51	9

• *Top six advance to championship round, bottom five enter lower-league round*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PKR Svay Rieng (C)	30	21	3	6	83	34	66
Phnom Penh Crown	30	17	5	8	53	36	56
Angkor Tiger	30	17	5	8	71	43	56
Boeung Ket	30	15	8	7	44	29	53
Nagaworld	30	12	7	11	42	39	43
MOI Kompong Dewa	30	11	7	12	41	46	40

Lower Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Visakha	28	15	8	5	57	31	53
Kirivong Sok Sen Chey	28	7	3	18	30	57	24
Royal Cambodian Armed Forces	28	5	6	17	28	76	21
Life Sihanoukville	28	6	2	20	28	59	20
ISI Dangkor Senchey	28	4	6	18	32	61	18

HONG KONG

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kitchee (C)	22	16	4	2	54	28	52
Tai Po	22	13	4	5	49	32	43
Lee Man	22	12	6	4	57	26	42
Eastern	22	9	5	8	39	37	32
North District	22	8	8	6	43	39	32
Kowloon City	22	8	4	10	28	39	28
Southern	22	7	4	11	28	35	25
Eastern District	22	5	6	11	20	22	21
Rangers	22	6	3	13	26	44	21
HKFC (R)	22	3	2	17	18	60	11

INDIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
East Bengal (C)	13	7	5	1	30	11	26
Mohun Bagan	13	7	5	1	23	9	26
Mumbai City	13	7	4	2	17	9	25
Bengaluru	13	6	5	2	18	12	23
Jamshedpur	13	6	4	3	15	10	22
Punjab	13	6	4	3	18	12	22
Goa	13	5	5	3	15	11	20
Kerala Blasters	13	5	2	6	15	17	17
NorthEast United	13	4	4	5	16	21	16
Inter Kashi	13	3	4	6	11	17	13
Odisha	13	2	5	6	14	22	11
Delhi	13	2	5	6	13	17	11
Chennaiyin	13	2	3	8	9	21	9
Mohammedan (R)	13	0	3	10	7	32	3

JORDAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hussein (C)	27	19	5	3	70	17	62
Al Faisaly	27	17	5	5	52	25	56
Al Wehdat	27	16	6	5	45	19	54
Al Ramtha	27	13	9	5	40	26	48
Al Salt	27	9	7	11	33	35	34
Al Jazeera	27	8	7	12	28	45	31
Shabab Al Ordon	27	7	8	12	22	37	29
Al Baqa'a	27	7	7	13	41	66	28
Al Ahli (R)	27	5	9	13	26	44	24
Al Sarhan (R)	27	1	3	23	15	58	6

LAOS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ezra (C)	18	15	1	2	63	16	46
Young Elephant	18	14	2	2	46	8	44
GB FC	18	10	4	4	50	21	34
Champasak Avenir	18	8	4	6	34	20	28
Lao Army	18	8	3	7	25	32	27
Salavan United	18	7	5	6	31	27	26
Luang Prabang United	18	5	5	8	26	30	20
Namtha United	18	5	4	9	23	34	19
Master 7	18	1	5	12	15	49	8
Savannakhet	18	0	1	17	10	86	1

MYANMAR

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shan United (C)	22	18	4	0	66	10	58
Yangon United	22	18	3	1	70	7	57
Dagon Star United	22	11	6	5	39	30	39
ISPE	22	9	4	9	35	46	31
Hantharwady United	22	7	7	8	32	34	28
Mahar United	22	7	7	8	39	44	28
Yadanarbon	22	7	5	10	38	38	26
Ayeyawady United	22	7	5	10	25	26	26
Thitsar Arman	22	5	9	8	36	38	24
Dagon Port	22	5	7	10	44	62	22
Rakhine United (R)	22	5	4	13	28	54	19
Yarmanya United (R)	22	1	3	18	17	80	6

QATAR

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Sadd (C)	22	14	3	5	56	30	45
Al Shamal	22	12	4	6	39	28	40
Al Rayyan	22	11	5	6	46	32	38
Al Gharafa	22	11	3	8	36	36	36
Al Duhail	22	9	6	7	40	27	33
Qatar SC	22	9	5	8	34	32	32
Al Arabi	22	9	5	8	37	41	32
Al Wakrah	22	7	6	9	32	36	27
Al Ahli	22	8	2	12	34	43	26
Al Sailiya	22	6	4	12	25	38	22
Al Shahaniya*	22	6	3	13	22	39	21
Umm Salal (R)	22	6	2	14	37	56	20

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 9: Al Shahaniya 3-0 Al Kharaitiyat

SAUDI ARABIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Nassr (C)	34	28	2	4	91	28	86
Al Hilal	34	25	9	0	85	27	84
Al Ahli	34	25	6	3	71	25	81
Al Qadsiah	34	23	8	3	83	34	77
Al Ittihad	34	16	7	11	55	48	55
Al Taawoun	34	15	8	11	59	46	53
Al Ettifaq	34	14	8	12	51	55	50
Neom	34	12	9	13	43	48	45
Al Hazem	34	11	9	14	38	57	42
Al Fayha	34	10	8	16	41	54	38
Al Khaleej	34	10	7	17	54	62	37
Al Fateh	34	9	10	15	41	55	37
Al Shabab	34	8	11	15	44	57	35
Al Kholood	34	9	6	19	39	61	33
Al Riyadh	34	7	9	18	35	63	30
Damac (R)	34	6	11	17	32	55	29
Al Okhdood (R)	34	5	5	24	27	70	20
Al Najma (R)	34	3	7	24	32	76	16

SINGAPORE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lion City Sailors (C)	21	16	3	2	70	14	51
Tampines Rovers	21	15	4	2	58	21	49
Albirex Niigata	21	15	2	4	47	19	47
Balestier Khalsa	21	11	2	8	44	46	35
Geylang International	21	7	3	11	29	42	24
Hougang United	21	7	0	14	24	41	21
Young Lions	21	2	3	16	15	58	9
Tanjong Pagar United	21	2	1	18	17	63	7

SRI LANKA

Regular Season Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saunders	6	4	2	0	16	6	14
New Star	6	4	1	1	21	4	13
Serendib	6	4	1	1	16	6	13
Java Lane	6	2	2	2	11	9	8
Crystal Palace	6	2	1	3	10	14	7
Negombo Youth	6	1	1	4	6	12	4
SL Transport Board	6	0	0	6	1	30	0

• *Top four advance to championship round, bottom three enter relegation round*

Regular Season Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pelicans	6	3	3	0	11	4	12
SL Police	6	4	0	2	11	4	12
Solid	6	3	1	2	13	7	10
St Mary's	6	2	2	2	8	4	8
Super Sun	6	2	1	3	6	7	7
Moragasmulla	6	1	2	3	4	14	5
Matara City Club	6	1	1	4	4	17	4

• *Top four advance to championship round, bottom three enter relegation round*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pelicans (C)	7	5	2	0	9	3	17
Java Lane	7	3	4	0	14	4	13
Serendib	7	4	1	2	18	9	13
St Mary's	7	2	4	1	10	10	10
Solid	7	2	2	3	10	13	8
Saunders	7	1	3	3	14	15	6
New Star	7	1	2	4	10	16	5
SL Police	7	1	0	6	6	21	3

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Crystal Palace	5	3	1	1	10	2	10
Super Sun	5	2	3	0	7	3	9
Matara City Club	5	2	2	1	9	6	8
Moragasmulla	5	2	0	3	10	14	6
Negombo Youth (R)	5	1	3	1	5	5	6
SL Transport Board (R)	5	0	1	4	4	15	1

THAILAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Buriram United (C)	30	22	4	4	76	31	70
Port	30	18	6	6	59	23	60
Ratchaburi	30	18	5	7	55	30	59
BG Pathum United	30	14	10	6	45	29	52
Bangkok United	30	13	11	6	43	32	50
PT Prachuap	30	11	12	7	39	37	45
Chiangrai United	30	9	13	8	36	37	40
Chonburi	30	10	9	11	38	41	39
Rayong	30	9	10	11	44	49	37
Ayutthaya United	30	8	8	14	34	50	32
Uthai Thani	30	7	10	13	39	44	31
Lamphun Warriors	30	4	17	9	35	47	29
Sukhothai	30	6	10	14	23	42	28
Muangthong United (R)	30	6	8	16	27	52	26
Nakhon Ratchasima (R)	30	6	6	18	20	44	24
Kanchanaburi Power (R)	30	4	11	15	29	54	23

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ain (C)	26	21	5	0	62	18	68
Shabab Al Ahli	26	17	7	2	60	18	58
Al Wasl	26	14	6	6	39	29	48
Al Jazira	26	13	5	8	46	30	44
Al Wahda	26	10	10	6	38	26	40
Al Nasr	26	9	11	6	36	34	38
Ajman	26	9	5	12	27	34	32
Sharjah	26	8	5	13	35	47	29
Khor Fakkan	26	6	9	11	35	45	27
Baniyas	26	7	6	13	29	43	27
Kalba	26	5	9	12	29	45	24
Al Dhafra	26	6	4	16	28	52	22
Al Bataeh (R)	26	4	9	13	24	37	21
Dibba (R)	26	5	5	16	25	55	20

CONCACAF

2026 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS CUP

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 10 – Monterrey
Monterrey (Mex) 2 (De la Rosa 35, 40)
Cruz Azul (Mex) 3 (Lira 25, Piovi 84 pen, Ibanez 90)

Mar 10 – Los Angeles
LAFC (USA) 1 (Bouanga 56)
Alajuelense (Crc) 1 (Bran 44)

Mar 10 – Chester
Philadelphia Union (USA) 0
America (Mex) 1 (Veiga 20)

Mar 11 – San Diego
San Diego FC (USA) 3 (Vazquez 32, 46, Dreyer 53)
Toluca (Mex) 2 (Gallardo 16 pen, Helinho 90 pen)

Mar 11 – Carson
LA Galaxy (USA) 3 (Gabriel Pec 6, 89, 90+6)
Mount Pleasant (Jam) 0

Mar 11 – Nashville
Nashville SC (USA) 0
Inter Miami (USA) 0

Mar 12 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati (USA) 3 (Denkey 6, 83, Barlow 53)
Tigres UANL (Mex) 0

Mar 12 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 0
Seattle Sounders (USA) 3 (Arriola 45, 58, Rothrock 70)

Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 17 – Puebla
Cruz Azul (Mex) 1 (Paradela 46)
Monterrey (Mex) 1 (J. Rodriguez 8)
Cruz Azul win 4-3 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Alajuela
Alajuelense (Crc) 1 (Van der Putten 4)
LAFC (USA) 2 (Ordaz 51, Martinez 90+2)
LAFC win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 18 – Toluca
Toluca (Mex) 4 (Angulo 43, 59, Paulinho 56, Gallardo 90+2)
San Diego FC (USA) 0
Toluca win 6-3 on aggregate

Mar 18 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami (USA) 1 (Messi 7)
Nashville SC (USA) 1 (Espinoza 74)
1-1 on aggregate; Nashville SC win on away goals

Mar 18 – Mexico City
America (Mex) 1 (Dourado 6)
Philadelphia Union (USA) 1 (Bueno 49 pen)
America win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 18 – Spokane
Seattle Sounders (USA) 2 (Musovski 79, Rothrock 83)
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 1 (Badwal 24)
Seattle Sounders win 5-1 on aggregate

Mar 19 – Kingston
Mount Pleasant (Jam) 0
LA Galaxy (USA) 3 (Klauss 18, Gabriel Pec 61, 87)
LA Galaxy win 6-0 on aggregate

Mar 19 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL (Mex) 5 (Aguirre 5, 49, Herrera 10, 46, Gorriaran 90+8)
FC Cincinnati (USA) 1 (Denkey 65)
Tigres UANL win 5-4 on aggregate

World Service

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 7 – Los Angeles
LAFC (USA) 3 (Son Heung-min 30, Martinez 39, 58)
Cruz Azul (Mex) 0

Apr 7 – Nashville
Nashville SC (USA) 0
America (Mex) 0

Apr 8 – Toluca
Toluca (Mex) 4 (Castro 12, Paulinho 43, 73, 85)
LA Galaxy (USA) 2 (Gabriel Pec 66, Reus 77)

Apr 8 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL (Mex) 2 (Herrera 51, Ragen 76 og)
Seattle Sounders (USA) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 14 – Puebla
Cruz Azul (Mex) 1 (Fernandez 18 pen)
LAFC (USA) 1 (Bouanga 90+7 pen)
LAFC win 4-1 on aggregate

Apr 14 – Mexico City
America (Mex) 0
Nashville SC (USA) 1 (Mukhtar 51)
Nashville SC win 1-0 on aggregate

Apr 15 – Carson
LA Galaxy (USA) 0
Toluca (Mex) 3 (Gallardo 10, Paulinho 58, 64)
Toluca win 7-2 on aggregate

Apr 15 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders (USA) 3 (Rusnak 11, 82, Musovski 48)
Tigres UANL (Mex) 1 (Joaquim 31)
3-3 on aggregate; Tigres UANL win on away goals

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 28 – Nashville
Nashville SC (USA) 0
Tigres UANL (Mex) 1 (Correa 33)

Apr 29 – Los Angeles
LAFC (USA) 2 (Tillman 51, Tafari 90+1)
Toluca (Mex) 1 (Angulo 73)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 5 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL (Mex) 1 (Brunetta 68)
Nashville SC (USA) 0
Tigres UANL win 2-0 on aggregate

May 6 – Toluca
Toluca (Mex) 4 (Helinho 49 pen, Lopez 58, Paulinho 90+2, 90+4)
LAFC (USA) 0
Toluca win 5-2 on aggregate

ANTIGUA & BARBUDA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Grenades (C)	22	19	2	1	65	18	59
All Saints United	22	18	2	2	72	19	56
Villa Lions	22	14	2	6	69	43	44
Pigotts	22	12	3	7	40	25	39
Old Road	22	10	6	6	75	37	36
Potters Tigers	22	9	6	7	41	36	33
Garden Stars	22	8	7	7	48	40	31
Green City*	22	6	5	11	35	41	23
Attacking Saints (R)	22	7	2	13	37	49	23
John Hughes (R)	22	5	1	16	17	68	16
Ottos Rangers (R)	22	3	2	17	24	67	11
Jennings United (R)	22	2	0	20	10	90	6

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off

BAHAMAS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
UB Mingoes (C)	15	11	3	1	61	12	36
Renegades	15	9	2	4	51	22	29
Dynamos	15	9	2	4	32	20	29
Western Warriors	15	9	1	5	50	30	28
United FC	15	8	3	4	34	16	27
Inter Nassau	15	5	2	8	32	34	17
Baha Juniors	8	2	2	4	10	14	8
Cavalier	15	1	1	13	8	99	4
Future Stars	15	0	4	11	18	49	4

BELIZE

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Verdes* (C)	12	11	1	0	37	10	34
Progresso*	12	8	2	2	29	12	26
Port Layola*	12	6	0	6	22	23	18
Belmopan*	12	5	1	6	24	19	16
Napoles	12	3	4	5	26	29	13
Benque Viejo Utd	12	2	2	8	13	32	8
Wagiya	12	1	2	9	10	36	5

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Finals

May 3-4:
Belmopan 0-3 Verdes; Port Layola 0-2 Progresso
May 10-11: Verdes 2-0 Belmopan (agg 5-0); Progresso 1-3 Port Layola (agg 3-3, *Progresso win 5-4 on pens*)

Final

May 18: Progresso 2-2 Verdes
May 24: Verdes 3-2 Progresso (agg 5-4)

BERMUDA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dandy Town Hornets (C)	18	14	1	3	39	16	43
Devonshire Colts	18	13	2	3	48	23	41
PHC Zebras	18	11	4	3	30	14	37
North Village Rams	18	8	5	5	41	24	29
Devonshire Cougars	18	7	5	6	44	38	26
X-Roads Warriors	18	6	4	8	38	41	22
St Georges Colts	18	5	4	9	29	41	19
Paget	18	4	4	10	18	30	16
YMSC (R)	18	2	4	12	33	54	10
Boulevard Blazers (R)	18	2	3	13	20	59	9

BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lion Heart (C)	20	14	3	3	63	21	45
Islanders	20	13	5	2	47	10	44
Virgin Gorda United	20	14	1	5	63	21	43
Panthers	20	11	5	4	73	21	38
Rebels	20	10	6	4	51	31	36
Wolues	20	10	5	5	61	27	35
Sugar Boys	20	8	3	9	40	45	27
One Love United	20	6	4	10	34	41	22
Old Madrid	20	4	2	14	29	79	14
Avengers	20	3	0	17	21	93	9
Positive	20	0	0	20	5	98	0

COSTA RICA

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Herediano* (C)	18	12	2	4	26	10	38
Saprissa*	18	10	4	4	34	19	34
Liberia*	18	10	3	5	24	18	33
Cartagines*	18	10	2	6	26	20	32
Alajuelense	18	7	5	6	28	20	26
Sporting	18	6	4	8	16	21	22
San Carlos	18	6	3	9	21	25	21
Puntarenas	18	4	4	10	22	29	16
Zeledon	18	2	8	8	19	30	14
Guadalupe	18	3	5	10	13	37	14

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Finals

May 3:
Cartagines 0-1 Herediano; Liberia 1-1 Saprissa
May 10: Herediano 0-0 Cartagines (agg 1-0); Saprissa 2-0 Liberia (agg 3-1)

Final

May 14: Saprissa 2-1 Herediano
May 17: Herediano 2-0 Saprissa (agg 3-2)

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Pantoja*	18	14	1	3	32	11	43
Cibao*	18	13	2	3	37	11	41
Salcedo*	18	9	5	4	33	22	32
Delfines del Este*	18	7	6	5	31	20	27
Moca*	18	6	6	6	21	21	24
O&M*	18	6	5	7	29	26	23
Atlantico	18	6	4	8	25	28	22
Atletico Vega Real	18	6	2	10	24	26	20
Jarabacoa	18	4	5	9	16	25	17
San Cristobal	18	0	2	16	5	63	2

*Advance to next stage

LIGUILLA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cibao*	15	8	6	1	22	11	30
Delfines del Este*	15	7	5	3	19	12	26
Salcedo* (C)	15	6	5	4	20	17	23
Atletico Pantoja*	15	4	7	4	22	18	19
Moca	15	3	5	7	12	19	14
O&M	15	1	4	10	16	34	7

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Finals

May 2-3: Atletico Pantoja 0-1 Cibao; Salcedo 1-0 Delfines del Este
May 9-10: Delfines del Este 2-1 Salcedo (agg 2-2, *Salcedo win 4-2 on pens*); Cibao 1-1 Atletico Pantoja (agg 2-1)

Final

May 17: Salcedo 2-0 Cibao
May 24: Cibao 2-1 Salcedo (agg 2-3)

EL SALVADOR

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
FAS* (C)	22	16	5	1	49	16	53
Luis Angel Firpo*	22	13	5	4	34	20	44
Alianza*	22	11	4	7	36	30	37
Inter FA*	22	10	6	6	27	25	36
Municipal Limeno*	22	10	5	7	33	21	35
Aguila*	22	10	5	7	27	24	35
Metapan*	22	6	9	7	23	30	27
Cacahuatique*	22	6	8	8	24	28	26
Platense	22	4	8	10	24	31	20
Hercules	22	4	7	11	27	43	19
Fuerte San Francisco	22	2	8	12	18	35	14
Zacatecoluca	22	3	4	15	23	42	13

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Finals

May 6-8: Aguila 2-1 Alianza; Cacahuatique 1-1 FAS; Metapan 1-2 Luis Angel Firpo; Municipal Limeno 2-0 Inter FA
May 10-11: Alianza 0-2 Aguila (agg 1-4); FAS 1-1 Cacahuatique (agg 2-2, *FAS win 5-4 on pens*); Luis Angel Firpo 1-1 Metapan (agg 3-2); Inter FA 2-1 Municipal Limeno (agg 2-3)

Semi-Finals

May 13-15: Aguila 1-2 Luis Angel Firpo; Municipal Limeno 1-0 FAS
May 17-18: Luis Angel Firpo 0-1 Aguila (agg 2-2, *Aguila win 6-5 on pens*); FAS 2-0 Municipal Limeno (agg 2-1)

Final

May 24: Aguila 0-3 FAS

GUATEMALA

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Xelaju*	22	11	6	5	34	19	39
Municipal* (C)	22	11	5	6	32	21	38
Deportivo Mixco*	22	10	6	6	30	26	36
Comunicaciones*	22	11	2	9	28	26	35
Antigua*	22	9	7	6	34	29	34
Coban Imperial*	22	8	8	6	29	22	32
Guastatoya*	22	8	7	7	29	21	31
Marquense*	22	9	3	10	25	29	30
Mictlan	22	7	6	9	25	36	27
Malacateco	22	6	4	12	19	25	22
Aurora	22	4	8	10	14	30	20
Deportivo Achuapa	22	5	4	13	17	32	19

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Finals

Apr 29-May 1: Coban Imperial 2-0 Deportivo Mixco; Marquense 1-1 Xelaju; Antigua 3-2 Comunicaciones; Guastatoya 0-1 Municipal
May 2-4: Deportivo Mixco 2-0 Coban Imperial (agg 2-2, *Deportivo Mixco advance as higher seeded team*); Comunicaciones 2-0 Antigua (agg 4-3); Municipal 2-0 Guastatoya (agg 3-0); Xelaju 2-0 Marquense (agg 3-1)

Semi-Finals

May 6-8: Comunicaciones 2-2 Xelaju; Deportivo Mixco 0-2 Municipal
May 10-11: Municipal 5-0 Deportivo Mixco (agg 7-0); Xelaju 2-0 Comunicaciones (agg 4-2)

Final

May 17: Municipal 4-1 Xelaju
May 24: Xelaju 1-2 Municipal (agg 2-6)

HAITI

Clausura Regular Season Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
FICA*	7	4	1	2	8	5	13
Tempete*	7	4	1	2	7	4	13
Racing FC Gonaives*	7	3	3	1	6	4	12
Baltimore*	7	3	3	1	6	5	12
Real Hope	7	2	4	1	8	4	10
AS Capoise	7	2	4	1	8	6	10
Cosmopolites	7	1	0	6	4	11	3
Ouanaminthe	7	1	0	6	3	11	3

*Advance to next stage

Clausura Regular Season Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Violette*	5	3	1	1	8	4	10
Juventus des Cayes*	5	2	2	1	7	4	8
America des Cayes*	5	2	2	1	2	1	8
Don Bosco*	5	2	1	2	6	4	7
Cavaly	5	2	1	2	5	7	7
Racing Club Haitien	5	0	1	4	1	9	1

*Advance to next stage

Clausura Championship Round Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Baltimore*	6	3	2	1	7	3	11
Tempete	6	3	2	1	4	2	11
FICA	6	3	1	2	7	6	10
Racing FC Gonaives	6	0	1	5	1	8	1

*Advance to championship final

Clausura Championship Round Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Violette* (C)	6	4	1	1	13	4	13
Don Bosco	6	2	2	2	2	3	8
Juventus des Cayes	6	1	3	2	5	5	6
America des Cayes	6	1	2	3	4	12	5

*Advance to championship final

Final

May 3: Baltimore 0-0 Violette
May 10: Violette 4-0 Baltimore (agg 4-0)

HONDURAS

Clausura Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Espana*	20	11	7	2	37	25	40
Motagua*	20	11	6	3	36	17	39
Olimpia*	20	11	5	4	35	17	38
Olancho*	20	8	8	4	28	16	32
Marathon*	20	7	6	7	23	19	27
Genesis*	20	6	5	9	20	28	23
Choloma	20	6	5	9	23	32	23
Platense	20	5	6	9	26	29	21
UPNFM	20	5	6	9	23	30	21
Juticalpa	20	4	6	10	18	41	18
Victoria	20	4	4	12	25	40	16

*Advance to next stage

Clausura Championship Round Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Marathon*	4	2	1	1	3	3	7
Olimpia	4	2	0	2	6	6	6
Real Espana	4	1	1	2	6	6	4

*Advance to championship final

Clausura Championship Round Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Motagua* (C)	4	2	1	1	6	4	7
Genesis	4	1	2	1	6	5	5
Olancho	4	1	1	2	4	7	4

*Advance to championship final

Final

May 22: Marathon 1-1 Motagua
May 25: Motagua 0-0 Marathon
(agg 1-1, *Motagua win 4-2 on pens*)

JAMAICA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mount Pleasant*	39	20	14	5	69	25	74
Montego Bay*	39	21	8	10	79	45	71
Portmore* (C)	39	17	15	7	54	35	66
Waterhouse*	39	19	8	12	51	32	65
Cavalier*	39	19	4	16	57	41	61
Racing United*	39	14	18	7	53	34	60
Arnett Gardens	39	17	7	15	68	46	58
Chapelton	39	14	7	18	42	57	49
Dunbeholden	39	13	9	17	40	53	48
Tivoli	39	11	11	17	37	58	44
Treasure Beach	39	10	13	16	43	59	43
Molynes	39	9	15	15	45	47	42
Harbour View (R)	39	9	12	18	53	73	39
Spanish Town Police (R)	39	7	5	27	25	111	26

*Advance to next stage

Quarter-Finals

May 10-11: Racing United 3-3 Portmore; Cavalier 2-2 Waterhouse
May 14: Portmore 2-0 Racing United (agg 5-3); Waterhouse 0-2 Cavalier (agg 2-4)

Semi-Finals

May 17-18: Cavalier 0-1 Montego Bay; Portmore 0-1 Mount Pleasant
May 21: Montego Bay 0-2 Cavalier (agg 1-2, *AET*); Mount Pleasant 2-4 Portmore (agg 3-4, *AET*)

Third Place Play-Off

May 24: Montego Bay 2-3 Mount Pleasant

Final

May 25: Cavalier 2-2 Portmore
(*AET, Portmore win 5-4 on pens*)

MEXICO

Clausura Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pumas UNAM*	17	10	6	1	34	17	36
Guadalajara*	17	11	3	3	33	17	36
Cruz Azul* (C)	17	9	6	2	31	18	33

Pachuca*	17	9	4	4	25	19	31
Toluca*	17	8	6	3	28	16	30
Atlas*	17	7	5	5	16	18	26
Tigres UANL*	17	7	4	6	28	18	25
America*	17	7	4	6	20	17	25
Tijuana	17	5	8	4	19	17	23
Leon	17	7	1	9	22	32	22
Queretaro	17	4	8	5	17	21	20
Juarez	17	5	4	8	26	32	19
Monterrey	17	5	3	9	22	24	18
Atletico San Luis	17	5	3	9	24	27	18
Necaxa	17	5	3	9	19	25	18
Mazatlan	17	4	3	10	22	37	15
Puebla	17	3	4	10	13	26	13
Santos Laguna	17	3	3	11	20	38	12

*Advance to next stage

Quarter-Finals

May 2-3:
Tigres UANL 3-1 Guadalajara; Atlas 2-3 Cruz Azul; America 3-3 Pumas UNAM; Toluca 0-1 Pachuca
May 9-10: Guadalajara 2-0 Tigres UANL (agg 3-3, *Guadalajara advance as higher seeded team*); Cruz Azul 1-0 Atlas (agg 4-2); Pumas UNAM 3-3 America (agg 6-6, *Pumas UNAM advance as higher seeded team*); Pachuca 2-0 Toluca (agg 3-0)

Semi-Finals

May 13-14: Pachuca 1-0 Pumas UNAM; Cruz Azul 2-2 Guadalajara
May 16-17: Guadalajara 1-2 Cruz Azul (agg 3-4); Pumas UNAM 1-0 Pachuca (agg 1-1, *Pumas UNAM advance as higher seeded team*)

Final

May 21: Cruz Azul 0-0 Pumas UNAM
May 24: Pumas UNAM 1-2 Cruz Azul (agg 1-2)

NICARAGUA

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Diriangen*	18	12	3	3	40	19	39
Real Esteli* (C)	18	11	4	3	41	19	37
Municipal Jalapa*	18	9	6	3	29	16	33
Managua*	18	8	5	5	22	18	29
Matagalpa*	18	5	7	6	30	24	22
Walter Ferretti*	18	5	6	7	18	28	21
Sport Sebaco	18	6	2	10	23	24	20
UNAN-Managua**	18	4	4	10	21	34	16
Rancho Santana	18	4	4	10	20	43	16
Real Madriz (R)	18	4	3	11	14	33	15

*Advance to next stage
**Enter promotion-relegation play-off due to position in overall table (Apertura & Clausura)*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 17: Matiguas 0-1 UNAN-Managua
May 24: UNAN-Managua 2-1 Matiguas (agg 3-1)

Quarter-Finals

Apr 29-30: Managua 2-4 Matagalpa; Municipal Jalapa 3-0 Walter Ferretti

Semi-Finals

May 2-3: Municipal Jalapa 0-0 Real Esteli; Matagalpa 0-1 Diriangen
May 7: Diriangen 3-1 Matagalpa (agg 4-1); Real Esteli 3-1 Municipal Jalapa (agg 3-1)

Final

May 10: Real Esteli 1-1 Diriangen
May 17: Diriangen 1-1 Real Esteli (agg 2-2, *AET, Real Esteli win 5-4 on pens*)

PANAMA

Clausura East Group

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Plaza Amador* (C)	16	9	4	3	28	16	31
Alianza*	16	6	9	1	26	20	27
UMECIT*	16	6	7	3	28	20	25
Tauro	16	5	6	5	22	19	21
Arabe Unido	16	6	3	7	16	20	21
Sporting San Miguelito	16	4	6	6	19	21	18

*Advance to next stage

Clausura West Group

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Veraguas United*	16	7	4	5	26	23	25
Union Cocle*	16	5	8	3	16	11	23
Independiente*	16	4	8	4	18	14	20
San Francisco	16	5	5	6	22	25	20
Universitario	16	3	5	8	19	27	14
Herrera	16	1	5	10	13	37	8

*Advance to next stage

Quarter-Finals

May 6: Alianza 4-3 Independiente; Union Cocle 1-2 UMECIT

Semi-Finals

May 10: Alianza 0-0 Veraguas United; UMECIT 2-2 Plaza Amador
May 16-17: Plaza Amador 3-0 UMECIT (agg 5-2); Veraguas United 2-2 Alianza (agg 2-2, *AET, Alianza win 3-0 on pens*)

Final

May 24: Plaza Amador 3-2 Alianza (*AET*)

SURINAME

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Robinhood*	24	19	5	0	62	10	62
Leo Victor*	23	15	3	5	46	26	48
Voorwaarts*	24	12	7	5	49	28	43
Inter Moengotapoe*	23	12	6	5	55	31	42
SV Transvaal	24	8	6	10	31	32	30
Broki* (C)	24	7	5	12	32	46	26
Notch	24	5	7	12	28	35	22
Flora*	24	4	5	15	33	64	17
Inter Wanica	24	2	2	20	11	75	8

*Advance to next stage

Quarter-Finals

May 10-11: Inter Moengotapoe 2-1 Voorwaarts; Flora 1-1 Broki
May 14-15: Voorwaarts 2-1 Inter Moengotapoe (agg 3-3, *Inter Moengotapoe win 5-4 on pens*); Broki 4-1 Flora (agg 5-2)

Semi-Finals

May 17-18: Robinhood 1-0 Inter Moengotapoe; Leo Victor 0-3 Broki
May 21-22: Inter Moengotapoe 0-3 Robinhood (agg 0-4); Broki 0-0 Leo Victor (agg 3-0)

Third Place Play-off

May 24: Inter Moengotapoe 2-4 Leo Victor

Final

May 25:
Robinhood 2-2 Broki (*Broki win 5-4 on pens*)

TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Defence Force (C)	22	16	4	2	58	19	52
Club Sando	22	16	1	5	51	13	49
Prison Service	22	15	2	5	42	24	47
Police	22	13	5	4	44	18	44
AC Port of Spain	22	11	4	7	38	31	37
San Juan Jabloteh	22	10	4	8	45	39	34
Central	22	8	3	11	32	50	27
La Horquetta Rangers	22	6	3	13	21	51	21
Phoenix 1976	22	6	1	15	29	54	18
Eagles	22	5	2	15	31	52	17
Point Fortin	22	5	2	15	22	46	17
Morvant Caledonia Utd (R)	22	5	1	16	30	46	16

TURKS & CAICOS

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
SWA Sharks*	7	6	1	0	48	5	19
Academy Eagles	7	6	0	1	20	3	18
Teachers	7	4	1	2	19	16	13
Cheshire Hall	7	3	1	3	21	15	10
Flamingo	7	2	4	1	10	10	10
Teachers Young Strikers	7	2	0	5	11	19	6
Beaches	7	1	0	6	4	27	3
Provo United	7	0	1	6	4	42	1

*Advance to championship final

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Academy Eagles* (C)	7	7	0	0	35	2	21
SWA Sharks	7	5	1	1	28	8	16
Flamingo	7	5	1	1	19	13	16
Cheshire Hall	7	4	0	3	22	13	12
Teachers Young Strikers	7	3	0	4	11	15	9
Provo United	7	2	0	5	6	32	6
Beaches	7	1	0	6	9	24	3
Teachers	7	0	0	7	8	31	0

*Advance to championship final

Final

May 3: SWA Sharks 0-2 Academy Eagles

OCEANIA

2026 OFC PRO LEAGUE

Circuit 4

Mar 14-15:
South Island United (Nzl) 4-1 PNG Hekari (PNG); Solomon Kings (Sol) 0-1 Auckland FC (Nzl); Vanuatu United (Van) 2-0 South Melbourne (Aus); Bula FC (Fij) 2-0 Tahiti United (Tah)
Mar 18-19:
Vanuatu United (Van) 0-0 Auckland FC (Nzl); PNG Hekari (PNG) 2-2 Tahiti United (Tah); South Island United (Nzl) 2-3 Bula FC (Fij); Solomon Kings (Sol) 1-1 South Melbourne (Aus)

Circuit 5

Apr 11-12:
Vanuatu United (Van) 1-2 South Island United (Nzl); Tahiti United (Tah) 5-1 Solomon Kings (Sol); Auckland FC (Nzl) 3-2 South Melbourne (Aus); Bula FC (Fij) 1-0 PNG Hekari (PNG)
Apr 14-15:
South Island United (Nzl) 3-3 Tahiti United (Tah); Solomon Kings (Sol) 3-2 Vanuatu United (Van); Auckland FC (Nzl) 2-0 PNG Hekari (PNG); South Melbourne (Aus) 2-0 Bula FC (Fij)
Apr 17-18:
South Island United (Nzl) 2-1 Solomon Kings (Sol); Tahiti United (Tah) 1-0 Vanuatu United (Van); South Melbourne (Aus) 1-2 PNG Hekari (PNG) Bula FC (Fij) 2-1 Auckland FC (Nzl)

Circuit 3 (reschedules fixtures)

Apr 21:
South Island United (Nzl) 1-3 Auckland FC (Nzl); South Melbourne (Aus) 8-1 Tahiti United (Tah)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Auckland FC*	14	10	2	2	26	10	32
South Melbourne*	14	7	4	3	40	18	25
Bula FC*	14	6	3	5	14	15	21
South Island United*	14	5	5	4	24	26	20
Solomon Kings**	14	5	3	6	14	21	18
Tahiti United**	14	4	5	5	20	28	17
Vanuatu United**	14	3	4	7	20	25	13
PNG Hekari**	14	2	2	10	14	29	8

*Advance to leaders group
**Enter challengers group*

Leaders Group

May 6: Bula FC (Fij) 0-1 South Island United (Nzl); Auckland FC (Nzl) 1-2 South Melbourne (Aus)
May 9: Auckland FC (Nzl) 2-0 Bula FC (Fij); South Melbourne (Aus) 4-2 South Island Utd (Nzl)
May 12: South Melbourne (Aus) 4-2 Bula FC (Fij); Auckland FC (Nzl) 5-2 South Island United (Nzl)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
South Melbourne*	3	3	0	0	10	5	9
Auckland FC*	3	2	0	1	8	4	6
South Island United*	3	1	0	2	5	9	3
Bula FC**	3	0	0	3	2	7	0

*Advance to finals
**Enter qualification play-off*

Challengers Group

May 7: Solomon Kings (Sol) 2-1 Tahiti United (Tah); Vanuatu United (Van) 3-1 PNG Hekari (PNG)
May 10: Solomon Kings (Sol) 2-3 Vanuatu United (Van); Tahiti United (Tah) 2-2 PNG Hekari (PNG)
May 13: Solomon Kings (Sol) 3-0 PNG Hekari (PNG); Tahiti Utd (Tah) 2-2 Vanuatu Utd (Van)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vanuatu United*	3	2	1	0	8	5	7
Solomon Kings	3	2	0	1	7	4	6
Tahiti United	3	0	2	1	5	6	2
PNG Hekari	3	0	1	2	3	8	1

Enter qualification play-off

Qualification play-off

May 17 – Auckland
Bula FC (Fij) 21 (Sela 18)
Vanuatu United (Van) 2 (Soromon 90+11, Haruel 120+1)
After Extra-Time

Semi-Finals

May 20 – Auckland
South Melbourne (Aus) 4 (Swibel 17, 32, Mikkola 39, Giannakopoulos 57)
Vanuatu United (Van) 0

May 20 – Auckland
Auckland FC (Nzl) 1 (Prins 72)
South Island United (Nzl) 0

Final

May 24 – Auckland
South Melbourne (Aus) 1 (Uchida 90+7)
Auckland FC (Nzl) 2 (Normann 23, Ellis 72)

VANUATU

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ABM Galaxy (C)	10	8	1	1	25	4	25
iCount Yatel	10	5	3	2	25	14	18
Ifira Black Bird	10	5	2	3	17	11	17
North Efate United	10	5	2	3	21	16	17
Naka*	10	2	0	8	15	31	6
Mauriki (R)	10	1	0	9	9	36	3

Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Apr 11: Erakor Golden Star 2-4 Naka

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NEXT MONTH

THE COMPLETE RECORD...

2025-26 season review

- ANALYSIS ON EUROPE'S TOP LEAGUES
- CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL REVIEW
- EUROPA LEAGUE & CONFERENCE LEAGUE

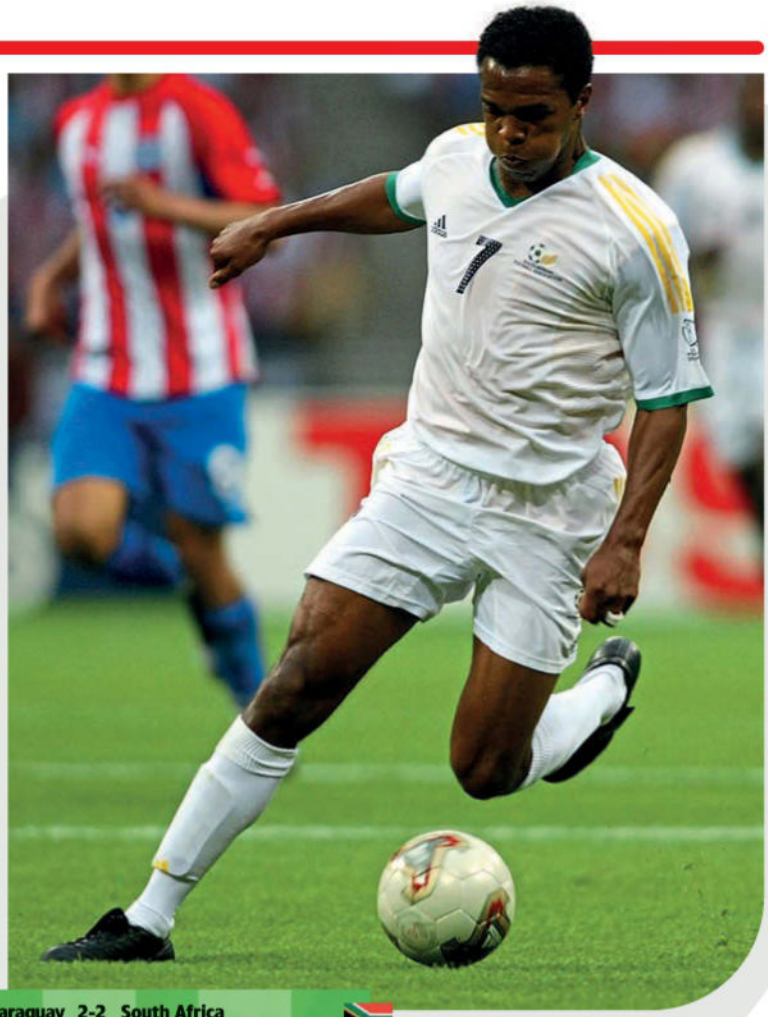
ON SALE JULY 10

Quinton Fortune

Paraguay v South Africa

2002 World Cup group stage, Busan, South Korea

The former Manchester United and South Africa midfielder looks back at a game where he fulfilled a childhood dream: to score at a World Cup finals



Dream come true ...Quinton Fortune in action at the 2002 World Cup

It was my second World Cup, we were in a group with Spain, Paraguay and Slovenia, and our aim was to get through to the knockout stage – a goal we had failed to reach four years earlier at France '98, South Africa's first-ever World Cup.

In our opening game against Paraguay, things didn't go well at first. We conceded late in the first half and after 60 minutes we were 2-0 down. But we managed to bounce back. Teboho Mokoena scored and then we were chasing the equaliser.

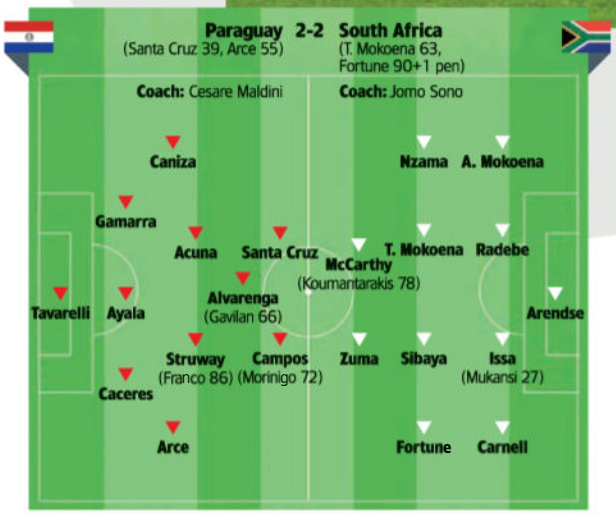
Late in the game I played the ball through to Sibusiso Zuma, who was very quick. The goalkeeper came out a little bit too late, there was contact and we were awarded a penalty.

I immediately took the ball. I took responsibility, in spite of the huge pressure at that moment. If I had missed, we would have lost that game – the penalty was already in added time. Earlier that year I had failed to convert a penalty against Ghana at the Africa Cup of Nations. I knew that fans and media were unhappy with me, so if I had failed again, I don't dare to imagine what the reactions would have been.

However, in those moments against Paraguay, when I picked up the ball, I was so calm and focused. I was in another world. I was in my zone. I was smiling. When I look at the video, I don't recognise myself. I sort of ask myself: "Who is this guy?"

While I prepared for the penalty, a Paraguayan player, I think it was Roque Santa Cruz, came up to me and told me in Spanish that I would miss. I was smiling and laughing. I was thinking: "Why is he saying that to me?" I was so focused. I knew what I had to do, what I wanted to do. That was so important for us, for the team and for myself to score the goal.

I knew that this was my moment.



When I was a kid, I dreamt of playing and scoring at a World Cup, like my heroes Pele and Maradona. I hadn't had the opportunity to do it in France.

When I scored, it meant a lot for us. We managed to get a result after being 2-0 down. We were happy.

Afterwards we won 1-0 against Slovenia, and then we lost 3-2 to Spain, who had top players like Xavi, Raul and [Gaizka] Mendieta.

We were unlucky to get eliminated. We were level on points with Paraguay and had the same goal difference, but they got through because they scored more goals – they scored six, and we scored five.

We were so disappointed. We got so close to the next round, where we would have played against Germany. But that game and that goal against Paraguay were so special, because I fulfilled my dream to score at a World Cup.

Interview by Vladimir Novak

Clinical...the South Africa midfielder buries his penalty

> "When I look at the video, I don't recognise myself. I sort of ask myself: 'Who is this guy?'"

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE JULY 10